

## A Question of Participation – Disengagement from the Extremist Right

A case study from Sweden

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*Publication date:*  
2015

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Christensen, T. W. (2015). A Question of Participation – Disengagement from the Extremist Right: A case study from Sweden. Roskilde Universitet.

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Tina Wilchen Christensen

A Question of Participation –  
Disengagement from the  
Extremist Right

A case study from Sweden

PhD dissertation

The PhD program Social Psychology of Everyday Life

Department of Psychology and Educational Studies

Roskilde University

October 2015

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*A Question of Participation – Disengagement from the Extremist Right. A case study from Sweden*

A publication in the series: *PhD dissertations from the PhD program*

*Social Psychology of Everyday Life*, Roskilde University

1<sup>st</sup> Edition 2015

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Cover: Vibeke Lihn

Typeset: The author

Print: Kopicentralen, Roskilde University, Denmark

ISBN: 978-87-91387-88-3

Published by:

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<http://www.ruc.dk/en/research/phd-programme/doctoral-schools-and-phd-programmes-at-ru/doctoral-school-of-lifelong-learning-and-social-psychology-of-everyday-life/>

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## Preface

This dissertation has been developed in the PhD program “Social Psychology of Everyday Life”. As an original piece of work it is engaged in research problems, interests and unique ways of developing knowledge and insight. It also contributes to the development of a new emerging field of psychological research: the social psychology of everyday life. Research in the PhD program “Social Psychology of Everyday Life” investigates the everyday life of human subjects in their cultural and societal relations. The program builds on transdisciplinary developments of theory, knowledge and methodology rooted in research problems of social life and connected to the everyday life of people. In this way the program is distinguished by a problem-orientated and transdisciplinary approach to social psychology in a broad sense.

Tina Wilchen Christensen has written an exceptional Ph.D. dissertation about exit strategies for the disengagement of participants on the extremist right. The dissertation consists of an introduction and six articles. In the introduction we get a theoretical and methodological introduction to the work. The author is working within a neo-Vygotskian approach. We also find an historical overview over right-wing extremism, and an overview over programs in Scandinavia and Germany and programs targeting Islamic extremists in Singapore, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The articles are about the author's study of the social work with former extremists in "Fryshuset" in Stockholm, Sweden. Tina Wilchen Christensen has participated in the activities of the program, observed and interviewed social workers, coaches, who are former right wingers, and participants in the program. The first two articles are about methodological issues in the study, and the third article analyses how former neo-nazis together with other staff at Fryshuset developed the EXIT program. The fourth article is about the mentor mentee relation as a deliberate practice. The fifth article is about how social interaction in the regi of "Fryshuset" leads the subject to reinterpret himself and his world view. The last article demonstrates how the former right-wing extremists are in a continued process of self-transformation and social repositioning. The organization of the introduction, the papers, and the ensuing conclusion makes the dissertation appear as a coherent dissertation.

Tina Wilchen Christensen's work is one of a kind. Her work is based on a thorough insight into the right wing extremism. In the debate about exit programs it gives arguments for close everyday work with right wingers who want

to exit their circles. The author's work stresses the importance of the right wingers' motivation for change, and demonstrates that by changing their everyday activities participants change their life and the implicit political understandings in it. It is also an important point, that the exit never stops but is a constant process of self-transformation and social re-positioning even after participation in the exit program. With her work, Tina Wilchen Christensen has contributed to knowledge necessary for disengagement programs for extremists and gang members, and from many sides there has already been shown interest in her work.

Erik Axel, Peter Hervik

Roskilde University, PhD program *"Social Psychology of Everyday Life"*

October 2015

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# The articles

The thesis consists of a collection of six articles:

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2014) 'To Study the Significance of Social Interaction for Former Right-wing Extremists Wanting to Disengage: Doing Participant Observation and Qualitative Interviews' in *SAGE Research Methods Cases Chapter*, <http://srmo.sagepub.com/view/methods-case-studies-2014/n140.xml>

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2015) 'The Challenge of Researching neo-Nazis Struggling to Leave the White Power Movement' in Deuchar, Ross and Bhopal, Kalwant, (eds.) *The complexities and dilemmas of researching marginalised groups*, Routledge

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2015) 'Tidligere ekstremisters erfaring som nyttig viden - at løsrive sig fra en ekstremistisk gruppe er en kompliceret affære' in *Social Kritik, Tidsskrift for social analyse & debat* nr. 142 - juni 2015 and an English version; 'How Extremist Experiences become Valuable Knowledge in EXIT Programmes' in *Journal for Deradicalisation* Summer/15, no. 3  
<http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/18>

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2015) 'When Good Intentions are not Enough - A Successful Mentor-Mentee Relation requires a Deliberate Practice' in *Psyke & Logos* (1)

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2014) 'Eine schwarz-weiße Weltanschauung durch Grautöne ergänzen Wie ehemalige Rechtsextremisten durch Vorbilder und soziale Unterstützung zum Wandel ihrer Identität angeregt werden können' Translate from 'Adding a Grey Tone to a Black and White World View – How Role Models and Social Encouragement can lead Former Right-Wing Extremists to Transform Their Identity' in Rieker, Peter (eds.) *Hilfe zum Ausstieg? Ansätze und Erfahrungen professioneller Angebote zum Ausstieg aus rechtsextremen Szenen*, Weinheim/Basel: Beltz Juventa, Weinheim/Basel.



Tina Wilchen Christensen (2015) 'The Continuous Struggle of Becoming...Somebody - Former Right-Wing Extremists' continued Process of Self-transformation and social re-positioning after an exit programme' (unpublished)

# The use of characters

Throughout the thesis I use the following characters and fonts:

Excerpts from interviews are in italics so they appear distinct from the surrounding text. Excerpts from the interviews are marked as (interview transcript) in brackets at the end of the example. This is to indicate that these are quotes from recorded and transcribed interviews, whereas excerpts marked as (field notes) refer to my description of observations from the field.

Words in italics indicate non-fiction or analytical concepts the first time they appear. Italics are also used to highlight words and concepts in the text.

Moreover, the problem formulation and the second presentation of the articles are emboldened.

... Indicates that the informants are making a pause.

All the staff and clients are anonymous. Locations and sensitive personal data have been changed.

“You cannot solve a problem from the same level of consciousness that created it. You must learn to see the world anew”

Albert Einstein

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.

John Donne "Meditation XVII"

# Part 1

## Introduction

How individuals come to join extremist groups has been of great concern for scholars of terrorism over the years. After 9/11, 2001, and especially after the London bombings in 2005, there has been an increased interest in understanding the processes of radicalisation into violent activism and terrorism (Bjørge and Horgan 2009:3, Köhler 2014, Dalsgaard-Nielsen-Nielsen 2013, Neumann 2013). Eventually, most individuals end up leaving extreme or terrorist groups, which make disengagement a normal and regular outcome of their involvement. This move has received increasing attention during the last decade.

However, despite the heightened focus, the process following the decision to leave an extremist group is explored to a much lesser extent than the individual and collective trajectories leading to the initial engagement (Bjørge and Horgan 2009, Gunaratna et al. 2011, Spallek and Davis 2012, Dalsgaard-Nielsen 2013, Altier 2014, Köhler 2014, Barrelle 2014 A, 2014).

Studies have been able to establish a basic understanding of the underlying motives involved in leaving an extremist group, which has made it possible to differentiate between certain categories of elements influencing the personal motivation to exit. It has thus proven useful to become aware of factors making some individuals exit, for example changes within the group creating the loss of position and status, ideological disillusion and disappointment with radical methods or the significance of external circumstances like having a baby or a family. Motives and factors summarised in what have become established terms like the concept of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors (Bjørge and Horgan 2009) and conceptualises in the newly developed pro-integration model of disengagement and reintegration after violent extremism (Barrelle 2014). In general, exiting a radical group or desisting from criminal offence involves several factors such as individual motivation, desire for change and an impetus

to live a 'normal' life, among others (Bjørge and Horgan 2009, Köhler 2014: 122-123, Dalsgaard-Nielsen 2013, Barrelle 2014 A, 2014).

Case studies indicate that increased contact with the world outside the extremist environment is a frequent trigger or accelerator of an exit process - a fact that supports the notion that external actors and external interventions can make a difference and that social influence - direct or indirect - appears to be at work (Dalsgaard-Nielsen 2013, Barrelle 2014).

Research does also reveal the existence of a process of disengagement and de-radicalisation as complex as the one leading to the initial radicalisation (Horgan 2009) as engaged individuals create identities and preferences relevant to the world of the particular group they are or have been involved in. Like when Eva - a former right-wing extremist in this study - explains how she after having left the group she was engaged in, started wondering what kind of music she *actually* liked, after having listened to heavy White Power music for years or when Johan hardly knew how to react or what to feel - apart from expressing the hatred and anger his emotional life had been reduced to - after being an active member of the extremist right<sup>1</sup> wing. Such issues are part of the reasons why some individuals are in need of support to develop alternative world views and social skills when they disengage and enter a different life world and the process *following* the disengagement into the development of an alternative identity is the subject of this thesis.

During the last decade, researchers, governments and secret services have become concerned with issues involved in leaving extremist groups, resulting in exit programmes being established in Europe and elsewhere to support (former) terrorists, gang members and political extremists when they leave their previous life on the margins and reintegrate in society (Bjørge and Horgan 2009). One of these is EXIT, a Swedish organisation, which provides support to individuals who seek to leave the extremist right. EXIT uses mentoring schemes, therapeutic dialogue and other activities to support the mentees/clients in developing alternative worldviews, self-understanding and identity.

EXIT is one of the oldest organisations of its kind in Europe and employs former right-wing extremists as mentors to support their mentees - right-wing extremists who want to leave the extremist right - in their disengagement process. This made EXIT, the staff and their mentees an interesting venue for the

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<sup>1</sup> Extreme right in this thesis refers to extra-parliamentary organised groups or networks (Bjurwald 2011) who seek political influence, also through non-democratic means, which is expanded in further details below.

empirical foundation for this anthropological study, which was conducted in three periods at EXIT in the course of 2012.

In spite of a growing amount of research examining various programmes and initiatives aimed at the de-radicalisation and rehabilitation of terrorist and other extremist offenders in the EU, North America, the Middle East and Asia (Spalek and Davies 2012), there is as Bruce Hoffman notes (Hoffman in Rubin et al. 2011), still very little written about rehabilitation programmes - beyond a profiling of these programmes in various scientific articles and reports from different think tanks. Yet, there is still a lack of details of how these programmes exactly work and how they support individuals in disengaging and especially deradicalising. What process do the individuals go through in them and why? And how do the individuals in those programmes perceive the support? Not to mention the understanding of personal motivation, what is the significance of personal motivation which is important in the European programmes, but not mentioned in research about the Middle Eastern and Asian ones.

These questions are the core focus of this study, as the ambition is to identify the methods used by the Swedish EXIT organisation and by which means they help individuals seeking their support as well as how that backing is perceived by the mentees. This is done by zooming in on the organisation through fieldwork and qualitative interviews with employees as well as former and present mentees.

Initially, it was assumed within studies of terrorism and social movement that peoples' participation to begin with was the outcome of their prior identification with a group's ideology<sup>2</sup> and struggle for a cause, directing attention to individual psychological explanations. The question has proved to be less simple, and attention has, in recent years, turned away from individual psychology to a focus on group mechanisms and social psychology. In order to explain the complex process behind individuals' subordination of their individual identity to a collective one, so that that which serves the group becomes of primary importance for the individual and the source of his or her identification (Horgan 2009: xii).

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<sup>2</sup> 'Ideology stands for 'systems of ideas that tell people how the social world is (supposed to be) functioning, what their place in it is and what is expected of them. Ideologies are patterns of beliefs and expressions that people use to interpret and evaluate the world in a way designed to shape, mobilise, direct, organize and justify certain modes and courses of action. They are often a set of dogmatic ideas associated with a system of values about how communities should be structured and how its members should behave. Ideologies offer an interpretation of social reality, a way to a better future and a model of the Good Society with a prescription how this could be brought about' (Schmid 2013: 9)

In most cases, people do not join extremist right-wing or racist groups because they are racist or extreme, but may rather seek thrills or protection, maybe due to a fascination for violence or the aesthetics linked to (Nazi) uniforms and artefacts, or because they are in search of a substitute for a family. Yet, others join to fight against what they have come to perceive as ‘crowds of Muslims crossing the borders threatening to take over the country’ or the move towards an increasingly multicultural society (Berntzen and Sandberg 2014). In any case, these groups appeal to different kinds of people, who may join for very different reasons (Bjørge 2009: 31-32).

One consequence of the change of focus from individual psychology to collective mechanisms reduces the importance of the individuals’ ideological conviction, which may appear not to be the main driving force for the initial participation in a social movement or (extremist) political<sup>3</sup> group. It can also be the other way round, that individuals join for other reasons - following e.g. a friend who is a member, a dim feeling of injustice or social coincidences - and through participation comes to *acquire* extremist views as an outcome of them having joined the groups (Bjørge 2009).

The development of the ideologically, convinced and dedicated individual seems to an overwhelming extent to presuppose participation in a social setting involving friendships and networks and other social factors situated in a given cultural-historical context (Bjørge 1997, 2002, 2009, 2011, Lyng 2007, Porta 2009, Christensen: 2009A, 2009B).

Social factors thus seem crucial, since they appear - in one form or the other - to be the main reasons behind individuals’ inclination to participate in an (extremist) group, which in turn makes them adopt certain political narratives and explanations over others shaping or reinforcing their ideological conviction. Therefore I suppose it must pose a huge challenge for the individual to leave a group and lose protection and community, not to mention the loss of his/her frame of reference as well as what particular incidences, social relations, sorts of interactions help them - meaning I wish to zoom in on the disengagement and deradicalisation process of *concrete* people, who have or are going through such a process.

A number of questions have thus puzzled me in relation to the disengagement process; such as what motivates people to disengage from extremist groups in the first place? And is it a gradual process of exit or when in the process do they make a decision to actually leave - if they make such a decision? Where would individuals turn in their search for alternative views and references in

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<sup>3</sup> Political, in the sense of participation in activities which seeks to instigate a process by which a group comes to control or influence the development in society

the process when they are no longer part of a group? And when they join a programme like EXIT, using mentors - what would the relation between the mentors and mentees mean in relation to the mentees' ability to develop and embody new social skills, alternative perceptions of themselves, their surroundings and the world? And *which* as well as *why* do certain kinds of support seem help make an individual leave an extremist group and build an alternative identity, which prevents him or her from jumping on to different, yet criminal groups. In other words: becoming radicalised is understood as a social process, but what roles do sociality and (social) interaction play for the individual in a disengagement process?

Which leads to the overall research questions for this thesis, which are;

**In what ways (if any) do participation and social interaction in alternative social settings transform our base of reflection, making us alter our self-understanding and identity?**

**Which cultural and social sources does the individual draw upon in the process, to identify factors and give answers to what can support a person's disengagement from extremist groups?**

The answers to these questions will especially add insights into the individuals' identity transformation processes and therefore also suggest how individuals, who are motivated to disengage from the extremist right or other extremist groups and gangs, can be supported in that process.

Disengagement and deradicalisation is a new field of research, yet this study moves a step further, in that the prime focus is on the process former right-wing extremists are going through *after* they have decided to leave the extremist group with the help of EXIT, who facilitate the individuals' already existing motivation and desire. My goal is to investigate the various aspects of the process to shed light on what EXIT Sweden's methods *do* and *why* they seemingly make a difference for the individual exiting extremist groups with their help. My ambitions are also to expose why disengagement from extremist groups is such a demanding process at a psychological and social level. It is especially important to illuminate why help is often needed for the individual to come to embody new ways of acting and thus a new identity, which seems to hinder that an individual with an extremist past just jumps boarders to a new and different, but still criminal, gang.



Based on 185 in-depth interviews with individuals who previously identified with various roles (e.g. spouse, clergy, prostitute, alcoholic, convict), Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) noted the process of exiting rarely occurs as a result of one sudden decision and often originates long before one is fully aware of what is happening or where events and decisions will lead (Altier et al. 2014).

For right-wing extremists who have disengaged, the life course *after* the exit phase seems to be the most demanding part as individuals must construct a new identity that integrates both their new and prior identity and life story - and perhaps more importantly, learn to act in alternative ways. This study will exemplify the below-mentioned challenges in an exit and what can be done to support what Ebaugh terms 'exes', in coping with the challenge of disidentifying from their previous identity. Thus, this stage is marked by significant adjustments to self-other interactions, demands that the individuals:

- learn how to effectively present themselves and - especially demanding for former neo-Nazis<sup>4</sup> - how to handle the 'ex' status, the stereotypical understanding of 'what a neo-Nazi is' as well as the enormous stigma linked to that position;
- learn how to behave in different environments (without the use of threats, aggression and hatred);
- negotiate and (re)establish intimate relationships;
- become able to shift social networks and get advice of and support to potentially having to relate in some form or other to former group members and enemies;
- handle social networks perception of oneself according to one's previous identity;
- get through the demanding process of establishing a way to enter the labor market, often with a criminal record and the Nazi stigma - just to mention some of the challenges.

The ambition of this study is also to reveal - in detail - the many steps - forwards and backwards - involved in developing a new embodied<sup>5</sup> knowledge and identity different from that of a group member<sup>6</sup>. As well as the reason

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<sup>4</sup> Neo-Nazi is refereeing to the Nazism which evolved after the Second World War, whereas Nazism refers to the ideology and actions of Nazi Germany or the Third Reich before and during the Second World War.

<sup>5</sup> By embodied knowledge I mean the sort of routines and unspoken incorporated knowledge and dispositions the individual develops by engaging in a particular social practice linked to a symbolic world

<sup>6</sup> A member is, in this context, a participant or a family member or anyone else who feels and is identified by others as part of a particular group. It is not a 'member' in the sense of paid membership of a club or association.

behind why the different sorts of support that EXIT provides are of value for the individuals in the process, perceived from both the mentors' and the mentees' positions. These issues will be discussed in six separate but interrelated articles - each of them dealing with different sub-questions - which together answer the overall research questions.

## The presentation of the articles and the sub-questions

The thesis consists of six articles, of which the first two concern the methodological challenge involved in this study, and the remaining four discuss specific topics related to the research question, by exploring a number of related sub-questions.

The articles and their sub-questions:

Articles 1, **'To Study the Significance of Social Interaction for Former Right-Wing Extremists Wanting to Disengage: Doing Participant Observation and Qualitative Interviews'**, and 2, **'The Challenge of Re-searching neo-Nazis Struggling to Leave the White Power Movement'**, discuss the methodological dilemmas I encountered during fieldwork as well as the implication of fieldwork as a joint-venture between the anthropologist and people in the field. The sub-questions asked are:

- How do everyday practicalities and the researcher's pre-conceived notions of the field influence the methodological choices made in the field?
- How can we overcome the limited opportunities for interaction with informants<sup>7</sup> in the field, and how can we approach them?
- How can contextual knowledge overcome some of the challenges involved in a study with limited interaction in the field?

The third article, **'How Extremist Experiences become Valuable Knowledge in EXIT Programmes'**, explores the development of a social

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<sup>7</sup> In anthropology, an informant is understood as "the native", who is an indispensable source of information, because he/she is regarded as a representative of a given group and its views. The term has an unfortunate connotation in relation to this study as 'informants' in everyday use can be somebody providing information to a third party.

practice in an organisation which supports neo-Nazis in becoming mentors/coaches, through the sub-questions:

- What social practice and cultural knowledge enabled former right-wing extremists' experiences to develop the organisation EXIT and its established practice?
- What processes help former neo-Nazis alter their identity and become mentors/coaches?
- Why must former right-wing extremists' experiences be embedded in a practice in order for it to become valuable knowledge in organisations supporting others in the process of leaving the extreme right?

Article 4, **'When Good intentions are not Enough - A Successful Mentor-Mentee Relation requires a Deliberate practice'**, concerns the relation between mentor/coach and mentee/client from the viewpoint of the coach by answering the sub-questions:

- Why is identification based on a shared past and empathy with a fellow human being not enough for a successful mentorship to develop?
- What conditions are needed for a coach to support clients' development, and to underpin their reintegration into democratic society?

Article 5, **'Adding a Grey Tone to a Black and White Worldview – How Role Models and Social Encouragement can lead Former Right-Wing Extremists to transform their Identity'**, also concerns the relation between mentee/client and mentor/coach, but from the mentee's/client's perspective. The sub-questions are:

- Which factors can pave the way for a neo-Nazi who feels ready to leave the White Power Movement, to develop an alternative identity?
- What can enable a person to transform into a democratic citizen who accepts the rules of a liberal democratic society?

Finally, article 6, **'The Continuous Struggle of Becoming...Somebody – Former Right-Wing Extremists' Continued Process of Self-transformation and Social Re-positioning after an Exit from the Extremist Right-Wing'**, deals with the never-ending process of identity-making

and clients' continued struggle with their identity formation after EXIT. The sub-questions in this article are:

- How do individuals coordinate with others when they are informed by a horizon of meaning they no longer identify with?
- What are the personal consequences for people who struggle with the knowledge of who they are without knowing who they want to become?

The argument in the articles hinges on the perspective of becoming through participation. The questions raised are an outcome of previous research projects, on which I shall expand below.

## Personal motivation

As noticed by Donna Haraway (1988), any narrative stems from an interest which forms our perspective of the fields we investigate as researchers, and this is also case in this study. This investigation follows from a research project I conducted in 2007, in which I analysed youngsters involved in a leftist movement, 'Ungdomshusbevægelsen' (lit.: "The Youth House Movement") in Copenhagen (Christensen 2009 A, B).

Through participant observations in demonstrations, clashes with the police, qualitative interviews with participants aged 16 – 44 and an analytical approach based on social movement theories, I gradually recognized the overwhelming significance which participation in social interaction, circulation narratives and collective action had for the individuals' transformation from peripheral onlookers to convinced activists in the Youth House Movement in Copenhagen (ibid).

The study led to my participation in the conference 'Youth, Radicalization and Disengagement in Scandinavia' in 2009, which again led to my first encounter with Robert Örell, head of EXIT, Sweden. Robert gave a lecture on EXIT, emphasising issues which are also asserted by ethnographic research into the extremist right, i.e. that participation in a group with a strong xenophobic orientation entails taking part in a sectarian social setting (Bjørge 1997, Bjørge, Carlsson & Haaland 2001, Bjørge & Horgan (Red) 2009).

Both Robert's lecture and research point to the importance of social interaction in the development or intensification of extremist views of other groups in society, and that participation stigmatises the person and starts a process of

social isolation, factors that speed up the process of the individual's connecting to the group (Fangen 1995, Bjørge 2001, Donselaar et al. 2009). My research into the Youth House Movement also convinced me that ideological conviction can be, but often appears not to be, the driving force for participation in a social movement or (extremist) political groups (Christensen 2009 A, B). As I knew about group dynamics, social processes and cultural knowledge in social movements and how these conditions informed participants in their identity formations, EXIT's approaches made me wonder about the above-mentioned issues in the disengagement process. Especially the outcome of the social processes the individual leaving an extremist group would be engaged in while being a mentee/client in EXIT and what sort of cultural and social sources the individuals would draw upon in the process. EXIT is not only the oldest organisation of its kind in Europe, but also one that uses former right-wing extremists as mentors (at EXIT they are called coaches) to support extremists – mentees whom EXIT name clients<sup>8</sup> - in their disengagement process. As I wanted to identify what the clients find helpful in the disengagement and deradicalisation process, and which practices EXIT has developed to that end, the staff and their clients became the empirical foundation for this study. My analytical focus included social movement theories, social practice theory, the cultural-historical of - or socio-historical school of psychology as well as social anthropology, which constitute the main theoretical foundation of the study, on which I shall expand in this preface.

## Outline of the thesis

This paragraph summarises the preface to the six articles in the thesis, which are theoretically and methodologically anchored in an anthropological approach making fieldwork, participant observation and qualitative interviews the chosen tools in my exploration of the world of Fryshuset, EXIT and the associated people. In 2012, I generated the data for this project by conducting the fieldwork at EXIT in Sweden.

The study's link to an empirical setting is why I shall start by introducing the field - Fryshuset – of which EXIT forms part - and the norms, values and to some extent practices which have shaped the two organisations.

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<sup>8</sup> I have adopted the word *clients* in the articles and in some parts of the preface. The reason is to avoid the term *former* to some extent and especially the word *defector*, which give the impression of an easy jump from one sphere or life to a different one.

This is followed by an overview of the theoretical landscape of the thesis and my position in it.

Subsequently, I shall detail the methods used in this research and my preconceived notions of the field, and I shall discuss the categorisations of my empirical data, followed by a presentation of my theoretical position.

Next, in part 2, I shall define neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists and the common denominators in the ideologies, organisations and parties on the extreme political right and explain my use of each label.

The preface to the articles also includes the positioning of Nazism in the Swedish society from the 1920s until today. This is done as I have been motivated by the impression that my informants' ways onto the scene reflect the history of Nazism in Sweden during the last century.

The study's focus on the disengagement process involves - I am at least convinced for the informants with a past in the extremist right in this study - a process of deradicalisation. At some point, the individuals with a past in the extremist right wing who were interviewed during this research perceived themselves as extremists, either under the label of neo-Nazis, right-wing extremists or as parts of the White Power movement, a position, identity and self-understanding they wanted to alter for various reasons. Yet, to become an *extremist* of any sort indicates that a social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political, or religious ideology or any other given ideology has taken place. Or, in other words, the individual has gone through a process of radicalisation (Horgan 2009). Therefore, in part 3, I will discuss the relative nature of - and use of - the terms *radical*, *radicalisation* and *disengagement* in the recent research literature on the field as well as factors which help and hinder disengagement and deradicalisation.

In part 4, I shall introduce EXIT as well as a few other programmes of its kind in Northern Europe, and I shall present three exit programmes targeting Islamists<sup>9</sup> in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia. I shall subsequently identify similarities and especially differences in these programmes, to illustrate the extent to which cultural knowledge informing the different programmes creates very diverse approaches to individuals categorised as extreme and the perception of the sort of support of which those individuals are in need. Then I shall discuss the programmes and the preventive initiatives several governments have initiated in recent years as answers to the still increas-

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<sup>9</sup> An Islamist is identifying himself with a socio-political movement that bases and justifies their political principles, ideologies, behaviour and objectives on their understanding of Islam. Islamist groups can be distinguished under the broad categories of moderate and radical (Ashour 2009:4) In the context of this thesis, Islamist is used in the sense of a radical.

ing amount of terror attacks in Europe, (North) Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Finally, I shall end the preface by discussing the different approaches in programmes as some of them emphasis ideology, whereas others such as EXIT, Sweden, focus mainly on behaviour and social interaction.

Then come the articles in which I analyse and discuss the different aspects of the empirical findings. The preface and summary will put the research into perspective within the field of disengagement and deradicalisation, while the final conclusion - placed after the summary in the end - will present a conclusion specific to the research question.

Ethics have been a concern during the research, and my reflections in that regard are reported in their context throughout the thesis.

Some of the informants have been involved in the extremist right at such a level that recognition could constitute a threat to their safety, so I cannot provide very much individual detail about any of them. The individual presentation must necessarily remain superficial.

Having thus presented the outline of the thesis, I shall now move on to a presentation of the field - Fryshuset and EXIT in Stockholm, Sweden.

## Fryshuset and EXIT - a normative frame for human development

In this section, I shall present Fryshuset and EXIT to convey to the reader a sense of what kind of centre Fryshuset is as well as how EXIT is part of it by being physically placed inside it and by being normatively constituted by its vision.

During the last decade, exit programmes have been started in increasing numbers in Europe, the Middle East, (North) Africa and Asia, hence in part 4 I shall present a brief description of certain organisations and exit programmes in Norway, Denmark, Germany and Sweden, followed by a presentation of selected programmes from Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Singapore.

EXIT is by no means the only organisation of its kind, yet, it is the only programme that I shall examine in detail in this thesis, because, as mentioned, EXIT constitutes an exceptional case, both due to its use of former right-wing extremists as coaches, and because it is one of the long-lasting programmes in the world. EXIT thus constitutes a case which can provide detailed knowledge of a successful and established programme and thus provide insight to *what* works and *why*.

Below, I shall describe Fryshuset's values, as it forms part of the YMCA and the normative implications of this relation for Fryshuset's and EXIT's approaches to youths and their potential problems.

As this thesis is methodologically rooted in an anthropological approach, I have carried out two months of fieldwork at EXIT, and hence also Fryshuset, on which I shall expand in the first two articles and later on in this preface.

As explained above, EXIT forms part of a rather large youth centre called *Fryshuset* in Stockholm. It was founded in 1984 by Anders Carlberg and a group of enthusiasts, who, encouraged by the YMCA, created a basketball centre for youths. Fryshuset's name refers to its initial location in an old storage building and means 'cold store' in Swedish.

Fryshuset has expanded from offering basketball and a rehearsal room into running a school and several programmes for vocational training, seminars and conferences, courses in theatre studies, music and sports, as well as hosting events, concerts, parties and discotheques<sup>10</sup>. EXIT is just one of many organisations that make up today's Fryshuset, and it is located on the ninth floor of the 24,000 square metre building in South Stockholm.

Anders Carlberg (1943-2013) was convinced that youths lacked recognition and guidance from adults. His visions for Fryshuset was to make it a *meeting* place, where people could *share* interests, *develop* social commitments, *do* sports, *participate* in entertainment and *expand* their knowledge through culture and innovative educational programmes<sup>11</sup>.

Anders Carlberg wanted Fryshuset to be a place where young people could become part of an active community. He saw sociality and interaction as a requirement for young people to develop the crucial self-esteem, which he understood to be imperative for their empowerment and as an essential foundation for them to develop agency to create a *good* life - irrespective of their personal backgrounds (Carlberg 2008).

Fryshuset shares YMCA's normative starting point that: *young people are in need of physical activity, increased knowledge and time for reflection in order to develop and feel good*<sup>12</sup> (author's translation) and its view of the individual as shaped by its social surroundings, which forms the foundation for Fryshuset's vision. The YMCA encourages people to show compassion and respect towards one another as well as to act with love and forgiveness as it is stated on Fryshuset's webpage: *'everyone is welcome, no matter who you are or what background you have'*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See more at Fryshuset's English website: <http://fryshuset.se/in-english/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://fryshuset.se/om-fryshuset/vision-och-vardegrund/>, <http://fryshuset.se/om-fryshuset/fryshusets-historia/> (11.11.2014)

<sup>12</sup> <http://kfum.se/om-oss/var-ide/> (10.11.2014)

<sup>13</sup> <http://kfum.se/om-oss/var-ide/> (10.11.2014)



(author's translation). This is also mirrored in Fryshuset's values: *'We believe in respectful meetings where the desire to participate and the common interests of all bridge contradictions and differences, increasing understanding'*<sup>14</sup>(author's translation).

In line with YMCA's vision, Fryshuset is both a youth centre in - among other places - Stockholm, but it has also become a vision for the empowerment of youths, in that Fryshuset states on its website that<sup>15</sup>: *'encouragement, confidence, responsibility and understanding are necessary in order to enable young people to develop their innate abilities and find their way into society'* (author's translation). Fryshuset can thus, in the words of Loïc Wacquant (2004:56), be described as a quasi-total institution when it seeks to realise this vision by engaging young peoples' bodies, minds and spirits through their involvement in activities in the centre, which also makes them become part of an active community with adults.

Fryshuset's model thus connects activity to → engagement → to become part of a community → to personal development. These steps are perceived as interconnected in Fryshuset and as a prerequisite for youths to develop their full potential. Fryshuset is thus grounding their vision normatively by laying down few, but what is perceived as fundamental, conditions for (young) individuals' self-realisation (Honneth 1994: 60 in Rosa 2014).

Anchored in the above-mentioned social perspective, Fryshuset is open to all, and the different organisations inside aim to empower marginalised youngsters and improve young peoples' social position by their activities and by providing information about them, their problems and potential solutions to society in general.

Fryshuset has expanded into an active and inclusive community linked together in a national network with more than 200 member organisations working to engage and involve young people who struggle with their emotions and/or an experience of exclusion from society. Fryshuset has - apart from the centre in Stockholm - venues in Gothenburg, Malmö, Skärholmen, Kalmar and Husby, and operates in different ways in many other places throughout Sweden.

Fryshuset and its practice of including marginalised youngsters in an alternative community provided the knowledge for the establishment of EXIT in 1998, and for its model for work with former right-wing extremists. EXIT's approach to people involved in the extreme right-wing also mirrors YMCA's and Fryshuset's perception of the individual's identity-making as connected to a specific context.

EXIT's approach to clients was inherited from the Norwegian EXIT project: that individuals do not necessarily join such groups because they hold extrem-

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<sup>14</sup> <http://fryshuset.se/om-fryshuset/vision-och-vardegrund/> (13.10.2014)

<sup>15</sup> <http://fryshuset.se/om-fryshuset/fryshusets-historia/> (10.11.2014)

ist views; they may *acquire* extremist views because they have joined the groups for other reasons (Bjørge 2009) - one of which is, according to EXIT, marginalisation and lack of social support.

EXIT's model for assisting what they describe as their clients – people in the process of leaving the extreme right – is to connect each of them to a coach – an employee with a past in the extremist right. Potential clients in EXIT contact the organisation themselves, but a few are referred to the organisation by various intermediaries, such as youth workers, police officers, teachers, parents or other family members.

Irrespective of how the contact is established, I shall emphasise that the personal motivation to disengage from the extremist right seems to be all-important for the individuals' change of lifestyle and identity to occur.

EXIT is a self-help programme that includes various forms of therapy sessions and social support to facilitate individuals' (re)integration into society. The organisation also works preventively and forms part of a worldwide network of people working against radicalisation and extremism.

In recent years, EXIT's success of supporting people motivated to leave the extremist right wing has led to the establishment of the sister organisation Passus. Passus works according to the same methods and assumptions as EXIT, but aims at gang members from street and motorcycle gangs. The latest addition to EXIT is CIDES – Centre for information on destructive subcultures. CIDES develops and disseminates effective approaches for combating the formation of destructive subcultures, reducing their recruitment and facilitate defection<sup>16</sup>. EXIT, Passus and CIDES constitute a unity of three individually defined organisations, which are placed in the same office and whose staffs interact daily, both on a professional and informal basis.

From Fryshuset's, EXIT's, Passus' and CIDES' perspective, members of street and biker gangs, criminal groups and extremist networks are all considered to have a destructive lifestyle. The three organisations see exclusion or the feeling of exclusion as paramount in youths' involvement in destructive subgroups. The three organisations perceive exclusion, or the feeling of exclusion, as equalling lack of recognition from society at large, and as one of the main reasons for the individuals' participation in destructive groups, where they can gather their entire identity in an unconditional relationship with the group, thereby gaining recognition as a (right-wing) extremist or gang member.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://cides.fryshuset.se/english/>

In Fryshuset and the organisations associated with its vision, recognition of the individual is considered a vital human desire, and necessary for the individual to make sense of oneself.

In Fryshuset's normatively grounded vision, the individuals can only make sense of themselves by being members of a society or a community which provides acknowledgement of the individual and conditions that are social and stable in character (Willig 2009, Willig and Petersen 2004).

Extremist groups and gangs are identified as destructive as they do not provide the conditions perceived as essential for the individual to achieve self-fulfilment and empowerment in Fryshuset's point of view. EXIT and Passus in particular define themselves through a relation of symbiotic oppositions (Wacquant 2004) to gangs and extremist groups, yet recruit former members of these groups as staff because they depend on their bodily and intellectual experience from these environments in their practice. Fryshuset's explicit values provide EXIT, Passus and CIDES with an ethical basis and an alternative community they can refer to, when they point out critical aspects of gang- and extremist political groups' culture that hinder individuals in developing self-esteem and life quality.

Fryshuset attempts to create equal opportunities for all individuals, irrespective of individuals' social backgrounds, through their participation in an appreciative community are thus based on normative grounds. In Fryshuset's perspective, the individual is not the sole master of his or her own fortune, but depends on others' recognition and inclusion to develop his/her full potential in a positive manner.

Fryshuset also encourages the cooperation of staff with very different backgrounds, and how that is done is described in detail in article 3; 'How Extremist Experiences become Valuable Knowledge in EXIT Programmes', in which I describe how Fryshuset and its practice facilitated the establishment of EXIT.

The overall idea of the YMCA and Fryshuset is to enact the principles of its simple philosophy; that all people, especially young people, are in need of physical activity, increased knowledge and time for reflection in order to develop and feel good. Fryshuset's philosophy thus points to certain conditions as essential for the individuals' achievement of self-fulfilment and empowerment, rather than presenting a model for 'how you ought to live your life'.

## The theoretical landscape and my position in it

In this paragraph, it is my intention to clarify the theoretical landscape of the thesis. The aim is to situate the project and the research within the frame of the existing literature and theoretical discussion in a comprehensive manner to provide an overview.

I shall give examples of certain relevant literature and discussions, which, nonetheless, is not part of the dissertation and my reasons for these choices. Due to the thesis being based on six articles as well as my abductive approach, different parts of the literature presented below will be accentuated in different parts of the dissertation. Yet, I shall discuss, exemplify and engage in dialogue with the different parts of the literature throughout the thesis.

In an overall manner, the theoretical foundation is informed by (a) social movement theory (b) studies of the extremist right wing (c) research about disengagement, deradicalisation and exit programmes (d) practice theory and the cultural-historical school of psychology.

In the preface and the conclusion, which to a much greater extent than the articles seek to present the subject in a general perspective, I have explicated and discussed literature especially relevant for questions linked to right-wing extremism as a political movement based in a social and cultural-historical context. This approach also informs my perception of radicalisation and the development of an identity as a right-wing extremist/Islamist or any other label attached to extremists, as my pre-conceived notions are informed by social movement theory (Snow et al. 1986, Tilly and Tarrow 2006, Karpantschof and Mikkelsen 2002, Karpantschof 2007, 2009, Christensen 2009 A, B). I thus understand the informants as developing their ideological orientation and identity as an outcome of their particular participation in extremist movements situated in cultural-historical time (Bjørge 1997, 2009 A, 2009, 2012, Köehler 2014, Berntzen & Sandberg 2014, Löw 2010, Neumann 2013). Therefore, I also understand radicalisation as a process which has accelerated as the outcomes of the individuals' involvement with an extreme group as exemplified by Fathali M. Assaf Moghadam model (2009 in Schmid 2013). I argue in the preface that to be *radical* needs to be perceived in a broader context for the word to make any sense. In this discussion, Schmid 2013 provides the main arguments - as well as others that will be addressed - as, in a comprehensive manner, his study presents radicalisation and its antithesis deradicalisation. The discussion of exit programmes and which methods to apply, as well as the question of - and discussions about - the significance of ideology, have central importance for the thesis. A discussion I engage in especially in the preface,

for which I shall explain the reason below. Many different scholars have engaged in the discussion, yet mostly based on sociological studies giving a profiling of the programmes and insight into the different approaches used (Ashour 2009, Barrett and Bokhari 2009, Abuza 2009, Gunaratna and Hassan 2011, Neumann 2010, El-Said 2012, Ramalingam and Tuck 2014, Riazat and Tuck 2014, Köehler 2014). Whereas other have focused more closely on ways to disengage - and deradicalise by offering insight into the potential paths which support people in leaving extremist groups, both psychical and cognitive (Björgo 1997, 2009, 2011, Horgan 2009, Porta 2009, Davies and Spalek 2012, Dalsgaard-Nielsen 2013, Köhler 2014, Barrelle 2010, 2014, Al-Hadlaq 2011, Boucek 2011, 2009, Rubin 2011, Dechesne 2011, 2014, Altier et al. 2014).

In relation to the discussion about the significance of ideology, there are other related sub-questions being raised. As for example the question asked in the RAND<sup>17</sup> report, which claims that it is a 'glaring gap' in the literature 'that nobody seeks to assert the potential differences between Islamist militants and other types of extremists, as many studies simply assume that there are no relevant differences, while others assert that Islamist extremists are uniquely dangerous and irreconcilable'. Although it is evident, as the report states, that 'religious doctrine distinguishes militant Islamists from other radicals, the effects have not been fully explored' (2010:26-27). These questions, nonetheless, touch upon a range of subjects; why should there be a different outcome from taking part in a group being defined through a political-religious ideology such as Islamism compared to taking part in groups defined by the political ideology of the extremist right-wing? At least if the question is about ideology and not the different activities, in which the individual is getting engaged by becoming a member of one group or the other. Ideologically, it is also debatable whether Islamism is a religious or political doctrine. At the same time as (neo)-Nazism has been compared to a religion rather than a political ideology (Koonz 2005) as have the sentiments right-wing extremists are experiencing. Raising questions - among others - about definition of religion versus ideology as well as the political orientation inherent in the preconceived notion of Islamists as per se 'uniquely dangerous and irreconcilable'. Debates in which I have not engaged as it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Being aware that Michael Kimmel (2007) has interviewed and analysed clients from EXIT, Sweden, I have chosen not to draw upon his studies apart from

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<sup>17</sup> Rabasa, Angel, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Jeremy J. Ghez, Christopher Boucek (2010). *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1053.html> (20.08.2015)

using is to provide me with an initial insight to EXIT. This choice is due to Kimmel's focus on gender, masculinity and participation in the extremist right as a sort of 'rite de passage', as the main explanation of males' engagement in the extremist right wing. Gender is not in focus in this study, and I have not come across empirical findings in my material that resonate with Kimmel's arguments, either.

My intention with the present study is rather different from the above-mentioned ones. My ambition is to provide (potential) explanations for individual paths to disengagement and deradicalisation. In this connection I wish to highlight Kate Barrelle's (2014) recent qualitative study of the phenomenon of disengagement, interviewing 22 individuals who have disengaged from various groups. Despite similarities in methods and focus there are also crucial differences. Barrelle especially investigated peoples' individual reasons for- and ways of disengaging, while I focus on the individuals and their particular activities after disengagement, to perceive the issues they are struggling with, *supported* by an exit programme. I shall return to Barrelle's study especially in the final paragraph and the conclusion.

In the articles, practice theories and inspiration from the cultural-historical school of psychology (Vygotsky 1978, Wertsch 2007, Zuckerman 2007, Cole 1996) become increasingly important as a means to explain which processes the agents are going through and how their action is informed by a symbolic world, mediated through material and immaterial artefacts. This theoretical approach allows me to analyse how their actions in a symbolic world makes them develop an alternative identity and self-understanding.

Social practice theory is a broad field, and even though Pierre Bourdieu (1974) and Sherry Ortner (1984, 2006) form part of the theoretical landscape, I have drawn heavily upon Dorothy Holland et al. (1998, Holland 2010). Social practice theory and especially Holland et. al's version of it is, as will appear in the articles and the presentation of the theoretical approach below, essential in order to grasp the interconnection between what Holland et al. conceptualise as *agents in figured worlds*. Holland et al. are drawing upon Bourdieu; yet, there are important differences between them. One of the differences is of great significance for this study, concerning their approaches to change. Bourdieu's theory of practice has been criticised for attaching to great importance to structure, which has an impact on the concept of habitus and the possible pace for change. Change is possible in Bourdieu's theory, yet the time frame is extensive, contrary to Holland et al. (1998, Holland 2010). In their approach, the emphasis on agents' improvisations makes it possible to grasp individuals' potentially major changes of their lives and identities within a time span of po-

tentially some years. Through the introduction of improvisations, Holland et al. significantly condense the time span in their social practice theory inspired by the cultural-historical school of psychology and thus Vygotsky and Bakhtin. This is important in a study aiming to identify significant changes in a person's lifestyle, identify and embodied knowledge within a limited time span. Since the theoretical concept of figured worlds opens up for a paced time span and the concept of many simultaneously existing figured worlds - which a collective of agents make come alive - it is likewise possible for me to describe an agent as being placed in-between worlds, a position of great importance in the present study.

In the preface, summary and conclusion, I shall position the findings of this study and put them into a broader perspective within the field of especially exit studies. This is done to detail which insight we, so far, have in exit programmes and the methods applied in them as well as how they are perceived by the people being subjected to its methods. In that connection, I shall also exemplify the concrete insight there is to be gained by applying ethnographic methods, social practice theory and the cultural-historical school of psychology in the field of disengagement and deradicalisation.

## Methods

### The *gaze* in the field

The ethical considerations, practical challenges involved in doing fieldwork in an organisation and interviewing people with very complex life stories mean that the choice of methods for this study is more than a usual challenge. The many considerations in this regard are the reason for having two methodological articles in the thesis; (1) 'To Study the Significance of Social Interaction for Former Right-Wing Extremists Wanting to Disengage: Doing Participant Observation and Qualitative Interviews' and (2) 'The Challenge of Researching neo-Nazis Struggling to Leave the White Power Movement'.

The Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestads' monograph 'Kitchen Table Society' (1985) and other of Gullestads' detailed investigation also formed my perception of the field. Gullestad argued that people construct meaning in everyday lives through interaction conditioned by social class, positions, gender and symbols (Gullestad: 1996, 1984, 1989). In line with Gullestad, the analytical approach to the research question is driven by the empirical findings in the field, which implies that I had, as described above and expand-

ed in further detail below, an inspiration and a particular interest in social interaction and the cultural resources people refer to when interacting and in explaining their actions during conversations and interviews. Yet it was only *after* having gone through the data generated in the field that I made the decision about applying social practice theory as the main theoretical frame when analysing the data material - which I shall expand on below.

Therefore, the articles seek to chart the actual paths of the inquiry as well as the data-generating process of the project by discussing the ethical and especially methodological considerations and choices to be made in the field. The articles thus describe the process as - and this is important - perceived in relation to my initial desire to investigate the specific relation between coach and clients, which, as the articles describe, fortunately changes during fieldwork, which is also why I shall not go any further into my methodological choices in this section.

The formulation of the research question is, as mentioned above, an outcome of previous readings and investigations, and the aim of this section is to present the theoretical inspiration which has shaped my gaze and informed my methodological approach. This implies that I perceive knowledge as situated as well as conditioned by historical, tradition-specific and contextual relations (Haraway 1988). This approach is rooted in Kuhn's paradigm theory and the idea that science is always guided by preconceived notions, particular questions to be answered and positions from which we perceive the world (Steno 2015).

During the writing of my Master's thesis in Social Anthropology at Oslo University in the 1990s, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's 'The social construction of reality' (1966) constituted a starting point for my perception of human thought as connected to social interaction and embedded in practice. I remember the joy of having found this book, in which Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman explain how reality is an outcome of a dialectical relation between human thought and actions and the social context within which they emerged.

This approach is derived from Marxism, which claims that consciousness is determined by the social. Berger and Luckmann's theory is also inspired by phenomenology and social constructionism (ibid: 17), in which *reality* is understood as collectively constructed and shared in order to become constituted as 'real' by groups of people. Their social-psychological views, especially important for the analysis of the internalisation of social reality, are greatly influenced by George Herbert Mead and the further development of his work by the symbolic-interactionist school of American sociology (ibid 29).



As mentioned above, I conducted an investigation of people involved in a social movement or the Youth House Movement in 2007 (Christensen 2009 A, B). The people in the movement developed a rather totalitarian perspective, in that they would interpret their personal life, actions and people in- and outside the movements through the ideological lens of the movement, turning all aspects of life into a political question. The interviews with the activists revealed a surprisingly similar interpretation of the episodes taking place during the revolt (*ibid*), despite their different social positions and age, which ranged from 16 to 44. It is an established perception in social movement theories that activists develop a fairly homogenised frame of interpretation and understanding as an outcome of their collective action and the circulating stories about these actions being shared among them (Tilly and Tarrow 2006, Karpantschof 2007, Snow et al. 1986: 193–225).

The research of the Youth House movement, and the analytical approach based on social movement theories, demonstrate the overwhelming significance of the individual's participation in activities and community and how the participation comes to constitute the individual's existence, perception and identity.

One of my approaches to the field was to participate in demonstrations, which included music setting the emotional mood for the event, backed up by a heavy representation of policemen dressed up in protective gear with batons, guns and helmets. I experienced the gripping atmosphere as well as the excitement and stress involved in the demonstrations, the mood of resistance and the feeling of the police as an unjust enemy to be fought, which helped inform my interviews and approaches to the field.

The study of the Youth House movement set the stage for my perception of the informants who had been members of the extremist right wing - in this present study. It made me aware of the different ways of becoming involved in a social movement and the possibility of developing an ideological perspective as an outcome of participation rather than a reason for it. But more importantly, the research into the Youth House movement also gave me a sense of an understanding of the informants' - in this research - description of their emotional experiences of excitement and thrill, during their participation in violent demonstrations and clashes with the extreme left, other political opponents and the police.

The subject is important as such clashes instigated several informants' continued participation in the extreme right. By leaving the extreme right, they should no longer participate in these sorts of demonstrations and violent clashes, which equalled the absence of intense emotional experiences for many

of them posing a challenge for some of the clients during their disengagement process.

The Social Movement theories, Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge and Marianne Gullestad's perspective all imply that I perceive individuals and their production of meaning as outcomes of social interaction and positions in socio-historical times, which also implies that 'cultural' is anti-essential. 'Cultural' is to be understood as 'cultural knowledge' and as an analytical concept, which comes into existence only as an outcome of the analysis of peoples' diverse perceptions within a given field.

The informants comprise a mixture of staff at EXIT and clients. I interviewed staff to understand their approaches and perspectives and asked the clients about their perceptions of the coaches' support.

The tone of this study has already been set in its title 'A question of participation—Disengagement from The Extremist Right, A case Study from Sweden'. My preconceived notions and the research questions have led me to focus on interaction at EXIT and the significance of participation in practice for people's perceptions and embodied knowledge.

My intention with the present study was thus initially to examine the system of meaning on which the informants drew in their thinking and acting, and how they came to perceive things in cultured manners through participation in a given context. Hence, my perspective is derived from the Marxist view that human beings are conditioned. In the sense that humans constantly (re-)produce the 'reality' to which, they, at the same time, are subjected and respond.

The above-mentioned preconceived notions and views have defined my approach to the field, informed my methods and thus influenced my findings. Yet, looking at the methods retrospectively, my different access to the employees at EXIT and the clients creates distinctive sort of material as it was possible to investigate the employees at EXIT through participant observation, dialogue and interviews, whereas I have 'only' interviewed the clients.

This has an implication as practice theory seeks to explain the relationship between human action and some entity, which some call *systems* or *serious games* (Ortner 1984, 2006) and others call *figured world* (Holland et al. 1998). The intention in my analysis is not to show *the impact of the system on practice* or *the impact of practice on the system*, but *the interrelationship between the system and practice* by focusing on the people acting informed by a system that they at the same time transform through their actions (Ortner 1984:148). The clients are only represented through interviews, whereas I did not have access to their interaction with the coach or other kinds of action. I could not follow the process they

went through or be part of their meeting with the coach. I have only been able to listen to and talk with them about *their perception* of such meetings and their interaction with the coach and the meaning they derive from it. These impressions were later on analysed to identify how the clients' perceptions are influenced by the coaches and their figured world and vice versa, with which I deal in greater detail in the first two articles.

The implication of this is that I do not have the detailed kind of insight into their interaction, compared to the observation I could make of e.g. people in the office and the significance of meetings and other kinds of interaction, providing me with very detailed knowledge of the development of the coaches' practice and their moves from for example client-coach to coach - which I describe in the articles.

## The production of knowledge

In anthropology, epistemology comes about by the anthropologist taking part in people's activities in order to share experiences with them to become able to grasp their reasoning. This makes the anthropologist an integrated part of the research process and the empirical data production, which makes reflectivity in the field essential (Hastrup 1992: 54).

The analysis is a result of the anthropologist's participation in the field, thus involving both the anthropologist and the people, which affects the empiricism of which both parties form part (*ibid*). This approach presupposes empathy and the impossibility of a division between the researched and the researcher. Reflectivity therefore means the practice of systematically questioning the position and disposition of oneself as part of the relationship, and a continuous scrutiny of the encounter with people in the field for inherent power relations and the impact of one's preconceived notions and focus (Hervik 2003). This makes the anthropological investigation a collective endeavor, although the selection of the data and the final analysis remain mine. One example of the kind of shared empiricism between the anthropologist and the informants occurred during the last part of my fieldwork. The episode exemplifies how the coaches' view of their own practice was affected by my focus and questions, generating further and much more detailed information about it. As one of the coaches told me, he could now relate, in much detail, the initial dialogue he had with a potential client, because, as he explained, he had become much more aware of his own practice through our dialogues and the semi-structured interviews. The staff at EXIT would also position me, which became apparent during my first interview with one of the coaches. Be-

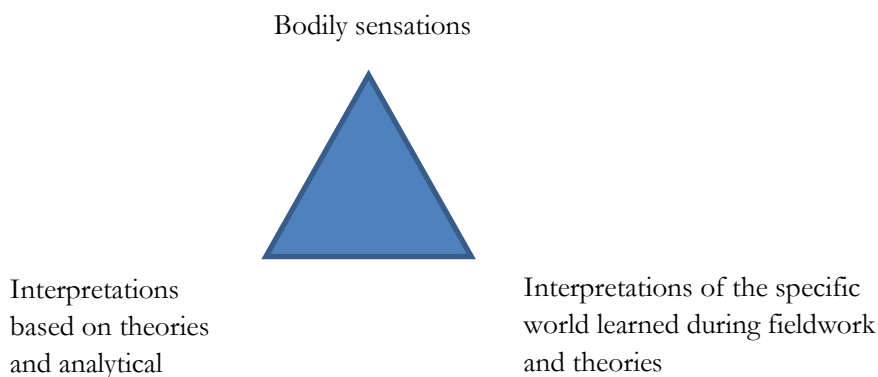
fore he came to EXIT, he had been involved with the extremist right for about 10 years. During the interview, he embarked on - in my view - a conspiracy theory about how society is controlled by specific people. He ended the long and convoluted explanation by saying; '*This goes to show you that people like me are not stupid*'. The remark and self-categorisation as a 'certain kind of people' made me wonder how he then perceived me, what 'kind of person' would I be categorised as?

To become an enculturated member of a field, anthropologist or not, implies that the individual's basis of reflection, and thereby views, undergoes a process of transformation. This encounter starts the process of enculturation, through which we learn the symbolic and practical context as we come to understand what is at stake through each other's reactions and subtle signs of approval or dismay. This process emphasises that, by analysing the shared context in which people act and to which people refer, we can come to define the cultural knowledge shared among people in the field. This again emphasises the anti-essentialist character of *cultural*, as it is shared, yet what we perceive will vary from person to person.

Hence, anthropological knowledge is the outcome of three sorts of input. The anthropologist's interpretation broadens the understanding of the field. Yet, the field has an impact on the anthropologist's hypothesis and theoretical perception, which are affected by the new ways of interpretation learned in the field. After the fieldwork, the new frame of interpretation learned through her participation in the specific world is re-interpreted, this time based on theories and analytical tools.

The process is illustrated by the example below.

The epistemological triangle of the knowledge production in anthropology and in the present study:



(Hasse 2002:322)

What I claim to be able to grasp is the open-ended process which creates cultural knowledge - the collectively produced system of meaning. Since this happens through a socially mediated and situated cultural process of learning for the individual, humans can access each other's perspective as, with the words of Batson: 'ontology can be learned, as ontology is an epistemological process' (ibid.). Therefore, individuals – anthropologists or not – can participate in that process.

This also implies that the knowledge production of this dissertation is abductive as the conclusion is the outcome of a hermeneutical interpretation of data, which seems to indicate that the support provided by EXIT's coaches to the clients bears an impact on their identity-formation process, and that we thus develop an (alternative) identity as an outcome of interaction in socio-historical settings.

Having thus presented how I view the production of knowledge, I shall move on to describe the categorisation of my empirical data and the reason behind the content of the articles in relation to the research question.

## Who? How many? - The initial approach to the empirical data

My interviews were semi-structured and the approach employed in these interviews was not intended to reveal the complete life stories, rather to access

accounts of the route in and out of the extreme right as well as the meaning attributed to these paths against a background of the disengagement and de-radicalisation process. Yet, I shall not expand on the interviews in this section as they are the subject of the two methodological articles.

The object in this research has been to provide understanding of both the disengagement process, the kind of support that helps people in the process as well as the identity formation involved; therefore, I have divided the informants into two categories, based on status (Kvale 1994:2008). I consider their perspective on the process as representative for people in a disengagement- and identity-formation process in a general manner, and secondly I have centred on their individual perception and the many nuances in the processes as well as the particularities.

By interviewing both the clients, coaches and other staff at EXIT, the study includes multiple voices. In the client interviews, I have identified some of the similarities in their stories concerning what appears to be difficult in the process and the sorts of support that have helped them move forward. Yet, my intent is also to grasp the many nuances linked to each of their individual stories in order to provide as many details as possible about the process following their disengagement.

When interviewing and observing staff, I focused on their diverse input to the development of a practice and on how their participation over time seems to make them develop an identity as coaches and staff - which I shall expand on in great detail in the articles. My aim has also been to identify how EXIT's and Fryshuset's frame of interpretation is passed on from coaches to clients and vice versa.

I conducted a total of 21 interviews of 15 people, each lasting from one to three hours. The majority were interviewed once, whereas the coaches and a few clients have been interviewed twice. This could conceivably have been done in a different way, which I discuss in the first two articles.

The 15 people interviewed are occupying different positions. They are either staff or clients. The staff can, for the sake of simplicity, be divided into two; general staff, and coaches. Four individuals work as general staff and do not have a past in the extremist right. They primarily work as social counsellors and/or social therapists at EXIT. One of the four is working as a coach, without being part of EXIT, but holds a different position in Fryshuset.

Positions in EXIT are fluid as people to some extent participate in almost all functions, which makes it hard to make sharp divisions among the different positions of the staff; the social counsellors sometimes work as co-coaches, since they also become involved with clients after the initial phrase.

I interviewed eleven clients, some of whom became clients up to ten years ago, while others have just started.

Of the eleven, seven are either former or present clients, and the remaining four have become coaches in EXIT. The different people interviewed give diverse perspectives on the practice and the field of EXIT.

Yet, many more people were involved in EXIT, Passus and CIDES on a daily basis participating in meetings and other aspects of the organisations' practice development, which will become clear in the third article; 'How extremist experiences become valuable knowledge in EXIT programmes'.

Before each interview, I would explain how the data would be used and that no information would be included in the articles that could lead to my informants being identified. During the interviews, I spoke English and sometimes Danish. I let the interviewee decide whether to respond in English or Swedish.

As the subject is sensitive in many respects, all the people who were willing to participate in an interview appeared to be comforted by my promise that I would be the only one listening to the recorded interview. This meant that I would transcribe all the 32 hours of material myself. I listened to each interview several times to get an overall impression. During that process, I would start the initial analysis of the content, which I would write into the interview in a different color, to avoid any confusion of the different text parts.

Aside from the interviews, my empirical data consist of observations of the staff's practice from a period of two months.

My approach can best be described as hermeneutic, as my interpretation of parts of the text has been influenced by the impressions I first developed in fieldwork and through other sources of data, and later expanded by going through the entire material (Kvale 1994). I have picked out certain parts of the material, which are included in the articles, the rest I consider background information adding to my understanding and possible interpretation of the informants' statements and descriptions.

When I picked the different parts of the material, I had to consider whether the quotes or descriptions were too sensitive to be published. In such situations, I have asked staff at EXIT whether the quotes could be used. On several occasions, this has not been the case, yet the safety of the informants has been more important than the illustration of a point by the use of an interview quote or field note. In such situations, I have found other parts of the material to use as quotes, or I have described the situation in my own words.

## Categorisation of the data and organisation of the articles

The reason for classification of the material and the articles' order is a response to a contingent coherence I perceived first during fieldwork and later when I analysed the empirical data.

In the beginning of my fieldwork, I was convinced that the client-coach relationship was of key importance as a setting. This view was contextualised during fieldwork, emphasising how the field informs the researcher, as mentioned above, as the fieldwork made it clear that the relation was absolutely central, yet not in ways I had anticipated.

The writing of the first article (5); 'Adding a Grey Tone to a Black and White Worldview – How role Models and Social Encouragement can lead Former Right-Wing Extremists to Transform their Identity', was about the client-coach relation in that order. The review of my empirical data made me aware that the coach's relation to the client is embedded in EXIT's practice. The relation is shaped in a particular way as an outcome of the practice development of EXIT, which is linked to Fryshuset as a context, conditioned by the culturally defined meanings system framing it.

The insight made me categorise the rest of the material in a way so as to make Fryshuset appear as a particular context, in which EXIT's practice is embedded. The connection between Fryshuset, EXIT, coach and client is perceived as crucial, which is also the reason for the sequence of the articles, because I wish to present Fryshuset and EXIT as both a physical place and a symbolic world, in which the practice development takes place in a particular way. This presentation will enable me to refer to it as a symbolic world, which conditions the relation between coach and client. Thus, I argue that it is crucial to convey the practice that shapes the coach as it influences the client's view on their engagement in and his or her disengagement from the extreme right. Figuratively speaking, the sequence comprises circles with the client in the middle, then the coach, then EXIT and then finally Fryshuset, and all of them are of course also embedded in Swedish society.

In order to identify the details creating these interconnections, from one person and symbolic world to the next and vice versa, which are part of the flow in everyday life when perceived in a totality, I have zoomed in on bits of dialogue, meetings in EXIT and statements from coaches and clients about their interaction. These situations reveal how people's identities are shaped through participation in particular worlds by exposing the tiny action involved in peo-



ples' interaction which comes to affect their individual views and carries the potential for personal development and transformation.

In the articles, I address different sub-questions, each article in the thesis thus deals with a subject in its own right. Yet, each article leads on to the next subject/article to demonstrate how the collectively produced yet different worlds people are involved in are constituted by them and constitute them (Holland et al. 1998).

Since the data collection process is the foundation for the rest of the study, I have placed the two methodological articles first. 1. 'To Study the Significance of Social Interaction for Former Right Wing Extremists Wanting to Disengage: Doing Participant Observation and Qualitative Interviews' and 2. 'The challenge of researching neo-Nazis struggling to leave the White Power Movement'.

In article 3, 'How Extremist experiences become Valuable knowledge in EXIT Programmes', I start the analysis of the empirical data by arguing that the experiences the staff of Fryshuset have gained from inviting (marginalised) youth to participate in the Centre's activities provided the knowledge base for the development of EXIT. The article shows how EXIT's practice has literally grown out of Fryshuset and the cultural knowledge there, under heavy influence of the first (former) right-wing extremists and their personal stories of radicalisation, disengagement and the difficulties they experienced during that process. Yet, crucial for the practice to emerge was also their cooperation with an employee, Ingrid, who was headhunted to the team by Fryshuset's director to be part of the EXIT team.

The main argument of that article is that the individuals who become coaches through their participation in EXIT's daily practice come to establish a convergent identity. Because of Ingrid's years of experiences from work in different psychiatric and psychological institutions, she was able to instigate a process of reflective cooperation between her and the team and helped the coaches reinterpret their deviant experience from the extremist world. Fryshuset employed different types of staff at EXIT, which resulted in both the staff transformation from being former right-wing extremists to becoming coaches and the establishment of EXIT's practice.

Article 4 'When Good Intentions are not Enough - A Successful Mentor-Mentee Relation requires a Deliberate Practice', zooms further in on the coaches' practice and the relations between coach and client, as perceived from the coaches' perspective. The main argument of the article is that coaches need to have contextualised and reinterpreted their own narrative of (dis)engagement and combined it with a deliberate practice, when interacting

with clients for their relationship to contribute to clients' development and reintegration into democratic society. The article also details how the coaches continue some of the practices they developed during their former careers as members in criminal and extremist networks, such as lifting weights. Yet, the horizon of interpretation giving meaning to the activities has changed dramatically since they now use weight-lifting both to uphold a discipline and lifestyle, but also as a therapeutic tool.

Article 5 'Adding a Grey Tone to a Black and White Worldview – How Role Models and Social Encouragement can lead Former Right-Wing Extremists to transform their Identity' continues the discussion of the coaches' and clients' relations, but now perceived from the clients' angle. I highlight the transformative process involved in interaction between coaches and clients when motivated clients leave the extremist right. The article describes how informal dialogue and activities create possibilities for EXIT's clients to develop social skills and experience new emotions, which adds layers to their frame of understanding, leading them to a new self-understanding.

The view that cultural knowledge is anti-essential, and that it therefore appears different from diverse positions, is the reason for the thesis containing an article about the practice, as perceived from the coaches' angle, as well as one focusing on the clients' perspective.

Article 6; 'The Continuous Struggle of Becoming...Somebody – Former Right-Wing Extremists' continued Process of Self-transformation and social Repositioning after an Exit from the Extremist Right Wing', concerns the challenges involved in the continued identity formation that individuals who have left an extremist group experience. These individuals struggle with not knowing who to become, combined with a heavy stigmatisation from democratic society for having identified with the neo-Nazi cause. The article brings all the other steps into play by highlighting how engagement in, and disengagement from, (right wing) extremist groups seem to be a question of participation in new worlds and the continued motivation to do so.

## Theory

Anthropologist Inger Sjørsløv has described the analysis of the empirical material as 'a sculptor's work' to illustrate how the final text grows out of field notes, impressions and the analysis. The sculptor starts her work of cutting away, and out of the piece comes a figure, a whole. The image conveys an idea

of how the final text literally grows out of the analytical process (Sjorslev 1995:180 in: Hasse 2002:340).

Grand theories or the application of highly abstract theories about empirical data, where the formal organisation and arrangement of concepts are allowed to take priority over understanding the social world (Merton 1968), have not been used in anthropology since post-modernism. This is also the case in this study, which, as mentioned above, is abductive with an analytical approach based on practice theory and the cultural-historical school of psychology. Practice theory came to a scene in the 1970s dominated by interpretative anthropology, Marxist political economy and structuralism. Theories which shared the common traits of 'constraint' by bringing focus to people's behaviour as shaped by external social and cultural forces which hardly gave any attention to human agency or processes (re)producing those constraints. Especially Eric Goffman's - among others - focus on interactionism set the structural constraints aside by bringing focus to interactionism and the micro-sociology of interpersonal interaction (Ortner 1984:1-7). The outcome was first a focus on structure and then a focus on agency and the significance of human interaction, introducing the structure/agency opposition. An opposition to which practice theory was a response first in the form of Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1978), Anthony Giddens's *Central problems in social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (1979) and Marshall Sahlin's *Historical Metaphors and Mythical realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (ibid). Practice theory thus brings to the forefront:

'the conceptualization between social actors "on the ground" and the big "structures" and "systems" that both constrain those practices and yet are ultimately susceptible to being transformed by them. They accomplished this by arguing, in different ways, for the *dialectical*, rather than *oppositional* relationship between the structural constraints of society and culture on the one hand and the "practices"... of social actors on the other (Ortner 1984:2)

Social practice theories do not generate true or false answers, but offer contingent systems of interpretation, as the theoretical focus seeks to explain the wholeness of a process by not only bringing attention to the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but to what people do with both intentional as well as unintentional implications. Practice theory thus focuses on the whole lived social process as practically organised by specific and dominant meaning and values and the reproduction and change of those forms and meaning and social/cultural whole through people's actions - yet perceived from a particular

angle (Ortner 1984). One of the most significant implications of this approach is also the realisation that human behaviour is not guided by fixed rules in social situations, for as Pierre Bourdieu (1978) points out, context-sensitive rules are impossible because situations always arise that do not fit the rules, hence human behaviour cannot be approached as determined by culture alone. Therefore, improvisation is the only resort when our past in the form of habitus is challenged by daily life's random demands for action (Holland et al., 1998: 17 -18), of course not actions of any sort, but action with reference to a broader system of meaning.

This perspective allows me to make certain empirical statements about the significance of providing support (ibid.) to (former) right-wing extremists and about the associated identity formation by zooming in on the empirical data generated through fieldwork at EXIT.

The theories used in the research have thus been applied as tools to expand the inquiry into the empirical material and to focus on individuals and the outcomes of their saying and doing conditioned by them being situated in EXIT and Fryshuset. By means of the theory, I have unraveled the data to bring the conclusion up to a general level.

Theories that are applicable to particular social phenomena and which are used to decipher what is at stake in the field and in the empirical material are defined by Robert Merton as 'middle range', as they are:

[...]intermediate to general theories of social systems, which are too remote from particular classes of social behavior, organization and changes to account for what is observed and to those detailed orderly descriptions of particulars that are not generalized at all. Middle-range theory involves abstractions, of course, but they are close enough to observed data to be incorporated in propositions that permit empirical testing. Middle-range theories deal with delimited aspects of social phenomena, as is indicated by their labels' (Merton 1986:39).

The empirical setting of EXIT is people in the process of transforming their identity, which implies that the individuals' self-perceptions and categorisation develop from one sort of identity, associated actions and perspective to different ones. My empirical material has thus required a theoretical approach, which captures the dynamic dimension of the self, and which can account for the interplay between change and a sort of established identity (Grossen and Salzar Orvig 2011), which, for the sake of simplicity, can be defined as developing a particular sense of who one is in the eyes of self and others (Holland 2010:271).

As my intention here is to describe identity formation in a specific context, based on a particular setting and empirical data, I have not gone through the vast literature about identity. I have chosen a theoretical approach, which highlights *identity* as formed in practice, which makes me focus on the practice and the multiple actions, activities and dialogues, which make people invest themselves in different worlds and thus develop an alternative identity - which I shall describe below.

It is thus pivotal to describe the significance of, and ways in which, actors engage in social practice, linked to a symbolic realm, to account for how their engagement makes them transform their identity and perspectives - irrespective of whether they engage in the extreme right, Fryshuset and/or EXIT. To describe the process of developing an (alternative) identity thus requires a frame that conceptualises action and agency as having recourse to symbolic structures of meaning (Reckwitz 2002), which has become a crucial aspect of social practice theory, in which identities are perceived as outcomes of self-identification and self-investments in a practice linked to a culturally defined meaning-system (Holland 2010:271).

The main part of the analyses therefore derives from the theoretical framework of *lived identities* in '*figured worlds*' (see below), which was developed primarily by Dorothy Holland and William Lachicotte Jr. (1998). The theory is based on the cultural-historical school of psychology, which perceives identity and agency as specific to practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed "worlds" or what Holland et al. define as *figured worlds* (Holland et al. 1998).

Their notion of identity formation builds upon anthropological and cultural studies merged with approaches from other fields. The theory draws heavily on philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead's sociogenic concepts of personhood, and on literary critic and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin's social weighing of expression, the creative life of association, dialectics and dialogism, but also on Lev Vygotsky's emphases on historical development and the potentiality of symbols for (re)formation (ibid:4), and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of practice and his concepts of habitus. The theory merges the social and the psychological by perceiving the self and the development of identities as outcomes of both psychological and sociological aspects. Identity and identity formation are thus perceived as a concept that figuratively combines the personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations (ibid.5).

I follow Bruce Kapferer's (1988) notion of not making a sharp division between sociological and psychological factors due to the simultaneity and in-

separability of the two, as remarked by Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant: any human phenomenon has both a psychological and anthropological side to it (1992).

I shall start out by discussing the concepts of *figured worlds* and describe how this concept adds meaning to the other terms, which constitute the main analytical concepts of the thesis: *identity* perceived as outcome of *history-in-person* and *signs* and *artefacts* as *mediating devices* of *figured worlds* in which one participates in order to become. Finally, I also wish to clarify my use of the terms *transformation* and *development*, both of which are of key importance in this regard.

## Figured worlds and mediating devices

As defined by Holland et al., figured worlds are socially produced and culturally constructed ‘realms of interpretation’, in which particular characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others (Holland et al. 1998: 52).

Figured worlds are the outcome of people’s collective meaning production, which takes shape within, and simultaneously grants shape to, the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances, and artefacts. Figured worlds are formed and re-formed in relation to people’s everyday activities and associated meaning-production. Figured worlds are that through which people identify themselves and that in which they invest themselves, in order to become special actors in a particular world (Holland 2010).

The figured worlds constitute the horizon of meaning, or a frame, against which people come to act and interpret themselves and others. They are cultural realms peopled by characters, such as the worlds of academia, the factory, crime, romance or environmental activism, or, as in this case, the extreme right, Fryshuset and EXIT. These ‘worlds’ constitute the reference for how people imagine they should act in these worlds and indeed expect others to act. When for example people enter a hairdressing saloon, they are immediately defined as costumers, expected to act in specific ways, and the customer expects a certain response in return.

The strengths of figured worlds are that the concepts direct attention to how different realms of reality are formed and reformed endlessly through participants’ activities, which add meaning to some sorts of actors, objects and actions over others. These particular actors, objects and actions develop within a locus of social activity and exist in the social world, which identifies and organises them and are defined as artefacts or signs, since they function as medi-

ating devices transmitting collectively formed systems of meaning (Holland et al. 1998).

Holland et al. (1998: 66-98) use an example from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to illustrate how the individual's identity is shaped in figured worlds, as they come to frame their personal stories along lines shared by other members. New members in AA first tell stories about their lives before they joined AA, stories in which alcohol is presented as a means to solve a problematic life. By being members in AA, they come to interpret their story within AA's horizon of interpretation, interpreting their problems as a result of their drinking - and not the other way around. The perspective learned in AA also makes them name themselves 'alcoholics' instead of drinkers and use the plastic chips, normally used in poker games, to indicate the length of their sobriety. The new members' perception of their problem is thus altered through their participation in a group referring to, and thus pointing out, a different order or coherences in their lives, which change the members' entire perspective on their problems, their lives and themselves.

People need to participate in the figured world of AA and to identify with AA's horizon of meaning for it to become personal knowledge in order to stay sober. It is absolutely crucial that a given horizon of meaning becomes personal knowledge as it is only when people come to personalise a given perspective that they transform their understanding of themselves and the surrounding world.

The world of AA is mediated to members through cultural resources such as the stories they learn to tell by listening to older members, and by the chips they use to indicate that they have stayed sober. Through participation in this world, the members come to mediate to themselves and others their identities as 'non-drinking alcoholics' by the use of certain signs and artefacts, since these elements, chips, stories, presentation, take on a special significance for the ones identifying with the world figured by AA. Participants thus come to perceive certain objects, position, identities and - it could be added - places in particular ways, as they are assigned meaning with references to a horizon of interpretation learned through participation and identification.

The concept figured worlds allows me to define the different worlds by which the clients are informed. Their participation in the extremist right made them develop an identity as neo-Nazis. They had thus come to embody ways of acting and dressing relevant to that world, making them identified by others as neo-Nazis as well as they would identify others according to the horizon of meaning in the extremist right. The clients had, for example, developed a black and white world view, an awareness of a particular look and the expres-

sion of strengths, harshness, hate and dedication to the causes in order to claim the identity of neo-Nazis and to be identified as such by others. Yet, there are many figured worlds existing in parallel, and to become clients at EXIT in Fryshuset also means to enter a different figured world peopled by actors who value other ways of looking, the expressions of openness, empathy and dedication to the cause. Fryshuset's cause is very different from that of the extremist right, as Fryshuset is informed by a horizon of meaning valuing the creation of an inclusive society for all people making people act accordingly. These are two crude outlines of two worlds figured differently, which I shall expand on in much further detail in article 3 in particular.

Holland et al. do not establish a direct connection between figured worlds and places as artefacts, apart from the statement that all kind of materiality can become artefacts and thus also place. Yet, I will argue that Fryshuset and EXIT are artefacts, as the social practice making the figured world of Fryshuset and EXIT emerge is expressed in subtle ways in the buildings, where the centre is placed. The architecture hints in subtle manners to the visitor that this is a particular sort of world set apart from the one outside the door, just by the selected expression of objects by the entrance: posters, industrially designed chairs, the building's architecture, slogans on the wall and the people there, etc. When people enter Fryshuset, they get a vague sense of the different activities and positions available here, whereas they will need to interact with others to learn the details of the figured worlds. I thus wish to bring forward that places can, in other words, be perceived as artefacts or symbols, mediating hints to a particular figured world.

## Identities

What is the connection between figured worlds and identities? Identities are the imaginings of self in worlds of action. Identities are lived in and through activity and develop through social practice. Yet, identities are also psycho-historical formations that develop over a person's lifetime and motivate social life (Holland et al. 1998:5).

Significant for the concept of identity is that it is situated and gains shape through participation and identification with collectively formed activities. Yet, our present position is linked to our past in infinite ways as one's *history-in-person* is the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject position afforded one in the present (ibid.). Identity is thus neither an isolated isle nor a disembodied discourse. It is what emerges as an outcome of the temporally



unique agent who improvises in heuristic manners in an ongoing process in response to the tensions between the individual and the social, the material and the psychological, the multiple and the unified, the stable and the dynamic (Salgado 2011:421).

The figured worlds and identities as formed in practice allow me to assess the implications of each individual's participation in culturally constructed realms of realities. The analytical perspective allows me to shed light on how the staff's diverse experiences play a role in EXIT's practice development. By pointing to a particular coach's experience through the analytical concept of history-in-person, I can identify how cultural knowledge comes into existence through a social process, whereby the coach also frames his story, as seen against the horizon of meaning in Fryshuset and EXIT. This in turn informs the coach of practices when interacting with the clients, which finally presents the potential for a transformation of both through their interaction and identification with the world as figured in EXIT and Fryshuset. Clients will become aware of alternative ways of acting and interpreting, which they can use as mediating devices for themselves to improvise on in a heuristic manner in the future.

By identifying the different figured worlds and the associated identity formation of the agents, I have also been able to describe the different figured worlds that clients and coaches have identified with. The analytical concept of figured worlds also allows me to describe the position of clients being in-between two worlds and the confusion it causes. To be in-between worlds is an indication of a process of transformation, i.e. the initial phase of developing a different identity, which requires a definition of what it means to transform an identity or develop a new one.

## Development and transformation

The informants among clients and coaches have initially developed their identities by being part of the White Power movement through enculturation. Coaches encourage clients to participate in new activities. During their joint activities, the coach points out alternative signs of importance for the clients connected to the figured world of EXIT and society. They thus support the clients in accessing an alternative horizon of meaning as he or she develops new cultural resources and social skills through the activities with the coach. The client learns to identify new figured worlds and how to manoeuvre in them through interaction with the coach.

Coaches become role models, and the examples set during their interaction with the clients as well as the coach's life story of having left the extremist right become immaterial artefacts he can use to mediate his own future behaviour and aspiration to a different life.

Eva, a former client at EXIT, described to me how her dialogue with her coach added new perspectives to her perception of immigrants in Sweden, which in turn made her perceive things differently, which, as she said, *'made it tickle in my tongue to repeat my friends' usual talk about immigrants'*, which she realised she could not do as it would become nonsense, as she said. The example illustrates what I define as development, in that Eva has developed a different understanding through dialogue and interaction, which has brought her to perceive things differently.

Development can be said to have taken place when the individual comes to perceive a situation or issue in a different way, which is irreversible and which has an impact on their entire meaning-system. An example given by Vygotsky in his dissertation and further interpreted by Holland et al. (1998) can further illustrate the point of how new insight into things transforms our entire perception:

'The Psychology of Art, included an analysis of a short story, Bunin's "Gentle Breath." His fascination with the way the closing image of the story transformed the whole feeling of the piece was part of his more general engagement with the potential of symbols to affect and reorganize experience' (Holland et al. 1998:6).

Holland et al. (1998) define development and change or transformation as (1) improvisations that come from the meeting of persons, cultural resources, and situations in practice; and (2) the appropriation of these products as heuristics for the next moment of activity. To the extent that these productions are used again and again, they can become tools of agency or self-control and dispositions (p. 40).

Over time, these day-to-day practices of social interaction continuously create situations where the individual is positioned as coach will have different artefacts pointed out to him both, material as well as immaterial ones. He will thus come to identify diverse and new coherences generating new insights and understandings and his identity as coach (if he comes to identify himself with the position) co-develop and become a disposition as he comes to embody the identity of a coach leading to a personal transformation. Transformation is an outcome of an individual's engagement in a social practice which alters his/her entire basis for reflection and reshapes his/her world view, thereby

allowing an alternative sense of self-understanding and identity to emerge. Development of an alternative perception will transform or reorganise the different parts of an individual's thinking, whether he or she is a former right-wing extremist or not.

The theoretical frame allows me to observe the ways actors enact and embody personalised cultural forms and develop identities through participation in figured worlds, as well as to point out how these worlds potentially provide the means for a transformation of identity (Holland and Skinner 1996 in Hervik 2011:11).

The next part will discuss common denominators across the extremist right-wing scene, neo-Nazism position in Sweden and the informants' way into the movement.

## Part 2

### Common denominators in right-wing extremism, the White Power Movement and neo-Nazism

This presentation of the common denominators in *Right-wing extremism*, *The White Power Movement* and *neo-Nazism* is meant to give an idea of the informants' ways into the extremist right, the types of organisation these individuals have been part of and the ideological content of the extremist right-wing scene.

I wish to render visible to what the extremist right is *extreme* in relation. Furthermore, I shall outline the main ideology of the extremist right wing, neo-Nazis and the White Power Movement, which makes it feasible to use these words - as I have done in the thesis - as synonyms, which is done partly to avoid linguistic repetitions. More importantly, the purpose of this outline is to show the racist and antagonistic culture by which the informants and others on the extremist right become informed through their involvement, as well as to illuminate the common denominators at work across the right-wing extremist scene.

The White Power Movement as well as neo-Nazi oriented groups are part of the *extremist right wing*. The extreme right is characterised as *extreme* due to its ideology and the methods used to obtain political goals. The extremist right rejects the core ideals of liberal democracy, equality and tolerance and consider inequality between people as a nature-given principle, and they reject the ideals of deliberation and voting in common decision-making. People who advocate the ideology perceive violence as a legitimate means to pursue political goals and approve the use of non-democratic measures such as threats, harassments and violence against political opponents and others perceived as inferior. Thus, the concept of an extremist is relative to a particular political system and its values, in this case democratic society<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> This paragraph is based on Klemens Kappel's lectures at the Danish Institute for International Studies on 17 - 18 September 2014. Kappel is director of the Department of Philosophy, University of Copenhagen.

To include 'right' in the definition also implies that elements of political ideology and organisation are present in the groups, movements and networks afforded this label (Bjørge 1997:21). The main issues and values promoted by groups etc. identified as extreme *right*, aside from the above-mentioned, comprise a cluster of notions that are present in most of the groups: authoritarianism, anti-communism/-socialism, anti-liberalism, militant nationalism, racism/xenophobia/anti-Semitism/Islamophobia and a general intolerance towards minorities. Further elements include Golden age myths, a particularistic morality and, as mentioned above, the notion of violence as a legitimate instrument in order to obtain political goals (Bjørge 1997:21).

This being said, there is no single philosophical core of the extremist right-wing, but it is rather constituted by various schools of thought with certain common denominators, and 'the right' is a way to indicate the traditions and thoughts as a sort of response to 'the left' of the political spectrum (Eatwell, 1989 in: Bjørge, 1997:22). The philosophies of the extremist right appear in diverse versions, but the core of inequality between people as a nature-given principle, and therefore a particularistic moral system as well as violence as a legitimise political instruments appear throughout.

The ideology of groups, networks and movements on the extreme right generally includes a drive towards an authoritarian society with a clear structure, order, and total solutions<sup>19</sup>. Part of the vision is an ethnically homogeneous society where there is no mixture of cultures or 'races', because some cultures are perceived as 'too different' to be compatible. Such arguments have unfortunately become more and more legitimate also among political parties that propagate a nationalistic agenda highlighting the dangers of immigration and of receiving what is presented as 'too many' refugees within the parliamentary systems across Europe.

The ideas that people from certain cultures are incompatible with the majority population often serve as the foundation of individuals' and (political) groups' arguments against immigration by people from, especially, the Middle East and Africa. Instead of speaking of *cultural knowledge*, implying a perspective of culture as the outcome of participation in a situated learning process (Hasse 2002), cultural knowledge is reduced to an undefined perception of *culture* emphasised as an essential characteristic people are presumed to be born with, which they cannot alter, irrespective of their social context. The understanding of and use of the term *culture* have in recent decades come to converge with

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/23/28/73/91f2a89a.pdf> (17-11.2014)

that of *race*, which was prevailing till the Second World War culminated in the holocaust.

Views on mankind as divided into races or cultures, and claims that ‘whites’ are somehow a superior race or culture, exist throughout the extremist right, although it varies how strongly this is highlighted. Views can vary from the notion of a ‘race war’, in which members perceive themselves as soldiers defending society against multiculturalism, as Anders Behring Breivik did (Hervik and Meret 2013), to the view that different races or cultures should be allowed to exist in the world together as long as they do not mix (Bjørge 1997).

Although neo-Nazism is part of the extremist right, not all right-wing extremist are neo-Nazis. Neo-Nazism is a post-World War II social and political movement that seeks to revive the extreme tenets of Nazism by borrowing elements from the Nazi doctrine, including militant nationalism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and the use of Nazi symbols and admiration of Adolf Hitler. Even though some neo-Nazis maintain and support anti-Semitism, extremist right wing groups such as the English Defense League (EDL) and Danish section of EDL display Israeli flags in demonstrations<sup>20</sup> to show their support of Israel and what seems to be the idea of a common fight against the ‘new enemy’ now perceived to be the Muslims and people originally from especially the Arab Middle East.

Neo-Nazis are not one homogeneous group, but rather an umbrella term for many different groups, all of which belong on the extreme right. Although neo-Nazis are still anti-Semitic and still single out Jews in forums connected to the extreme right, people who may be categorised as ‘foreigners’ as well as the fight against Islam have become the main target in the last decades. An agenda which might become even more accentuated because of the war in Syria causing a lot of refugees to escape to Europe adding, what part of the political spectrum formulates, as a ‘pressure on welfare goods and cultural coherence in the European countries’. Therefore, they now fight to stop immigration in order to ensure national ‘racial’ or cultural survival, which also indicates how the ideologies at the extremist right mutate, while remaining loyal to the core idea of an essential difference among people.

Neo-Nazism is generally anti-intellectual and lacks a single political ideology. It is most often centred on three elements: extreme nationalism, xenophobia and the legitimacy of violence to reach political ends. A number of neo-Nazi

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<sup>20</sup> Examples of this tendency occurred during the Danish Defence League’s demonstration in Aarhus, Denmark the 31. March 2012 <https://redox.dk/nyheder/baggrund-counterjihad-fra-cyberspace-til-bev%C3%A6gelse> (6.1.2015)

groups conduct violent assaults on people perceived as 'losers': homeless, foreigners, people of presumed 'Jewish descent' and others<sup>21</sup>.

Despite the fact that (neo)-Nazism is an incoherent extremist ideology, it is a global phenomenon with organised representation in many countries as well as international networks<sup>22</sup>.

The neo-Nazi scene in Sweden is considered part of the White Power Movement, which, in EXIT's everyday language, denotes any group containing some, but not necessarily all, of the ideological elements of right-wing extremist groups. Yet, the White Power Movement in Sweden is also considered a subculture with a world-view completely at odds with society around them. In this world view, ideas about the Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG), which, according to the movement, is a Jewish conspiracy controlling the world, and racial traitors hold central positions along with a powerful violence fixation (Björge 1997:162). With inspiration from classical National Socialism, the movement is highly anti-Semitic and advocates a strong leader to fight against ZOG. One key characteristic is the belief that white people are superior to people of other racial backgrounds, and that whites should therefore dominate non-whites politically, economically and socially<sup>23</sup>.

In the following, I shall describe the types of organisation that informants in this study have been involved in.

## Terrorist organisations, neo-Nazi groups or racist-oriented youth groups as a scene for participation.

The history of Nazism and fascism in Sweden seems to be reflected in my informants' personal narrative through the way they became involved in diverse parts of the extremist right-wing scene. In this section, I will therefore briefly describe how the Nazi ideology has been part of Sweden's history from the beginning of the last century, touch on how racial ideas became part of the mainstream music scene in the 1980s and 90s, until today where different neo-Nazi movements are still active. Then I shall describe the sort of environ-

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/23/28/73/91f2a89a.pdf> (17-11.2014)

<sup>22</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-Nazism>, <http://www.holocaust-uddannelse.dk/eftertid/nynazisme.asp> (17.11.2014)

<sup>23</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White\\_supremacy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_supremacy), <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/23/28/73/91f2a89a.pdf> (17-11.2014)

ments that the individuals receiving support from EXIT in general have been part of.

In Sweden, anti-Semitic activity has gone on continuously since the 1920s with roots dating back even further. Specific Nazi-related activities started in the mid-1920s when Nazi parties had considerable support at local and national levels, and Nazi or fascist propensities enjoyed majority support in several municipal councils. During World War II, Nazi-Germany sympathisers could be found in central sectors of the Swedish society such as the military, the police, the central government administration and the academic community. During the war, more than 500 Swedes volunteered for the German Waffen SS (Björge 1997:149).

After the war, there was a substantial decline in support for the Nazi and fascist organisations in Sweden, but Nazi organisations were never banned. Nor were collaborators and sympathizers with Nazi Germany compromised, as happened for those who had been involved with Nazism in many European countries. Several fascist organisations have continued their activities right up until today.

Sveriges Nationella Förbund (the Swedish National Union) and the fascist organisation Nysvenska Rörelsen (the Neo-Swedish Movement) have a history of uninterrupted activity going back to the 1920s, while other parties were established in the 1950's. These organisations were able to carry on Nazi activities in Sweden and internationally, which were forbidden in most other countries after the War.

The importance of these historical relations in this context is that these organisations have been instrumental in creating continuity between the old and the new generation of national socialists in Sweden (Björge 1997:150).

Sweden, especially in the 1980-90s, experienced a surge in xenophobic violence and a rapid increase in young people joining racist and right-wing extremist groups. This was a response to the portraying of immigration as a threat to Sweden and Swedes as an ethnic/racial group, making racist ideas and actions increasingly normalised as well as the longing for a "pure" Sweden inspired by German National Socialism, the militant parts of the Swedish Nazi movement in the 1930s, the English Skinhead Movement and the Apartheid ideology of South Africa.

There was a coincidence of several things in Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s which created a situation giving the extreme right wing renewed momentum. Sweden received an increasing number of refugees from the Middle East in the 1980s. In the same decade, the question of racism and hostility to foreigners became steadily more acute since the activities of racist and anti-Semitic



groups had become more visible and acts of violence had increased. Racism and anti-Semitism thus began again to become an important social question as public discussion became increasingly intensive. This was also instigated in relation to a much discussed case concerning a local Stockholm radio station, 'Open Forum', which attracted attention because of the incitement to racial hatred. For the first time in decades, racism, anti-Semitism and hostility to foreigners had become a matter of national importance. A trend which continued into the 1990s with a steady increase of offences concerning incitement to racial hatred (Löw 2010).

In those decades, youth became engaged based on a perception or feeling of 'getting less than their share' (Bjørge 1997) in opposition to refugees from Lebanon in the 1980 and Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Some parts of the Swedish population were questioning why Sweden should receive refugees, asylum seekers or immigrants when young people - as they explained<sup>24</sup> - were lacking jobs and places to live. Sweden suffered violent assaults on people in the streets, bombings, murders and bank robberies related to the extremist right (Bjørge 2009).

Different groups were established in this period, groups that appealed to young people joining the White Power milieu or loosely-knit movements dominated by what became VAM - Vitt Ariskt Motstånd (White Aryan Resistance). During the mid-1990s, White Power bands or 'Viking Rock' groups also appeared as part of the mainstream youth audience.

VAM received extensive media coverage because of several terrorist attacks and armed robberies in Sweden. The organisation gained a reputation of a racial revolutionary movement of importance, but only served as a role model for a few Swedish youth rebels. Yet, the group Ultima Thule - sponsored by the organisation 'Bevara Sverige Svenskt' (Keep Sweden Swedish) - which had appeared at concerts and on CDs with several Nazi bands - climbed to the top of the hit lists. Ultima Thule broke the barrier for other White Power bands into the mainstream music market, thereby spreading their racial message to new youth audiences (ibid). The group was/is described as a White Power band because of the themes for the lyrics and their contributions to compilation albums with other groups linked to the extremist right wing like Skrewdriver and Brutal Attack.

Ultima Thule became and remained part of the mainstream music scene during the 1990s (Bjørge 1997), which according to the informants who entered the extremist right wing in that period had a significance for their involve-

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kf-7eGeBzQ>,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdlmhRU4> PM (08.07.2015)

ment. As they would mention their fascination of Ultima Thule's and their songs promoting the Vikings, masculinity and Sweden as a particular nation. Some informants told how the wearing of T-shirts with prints of such bands would attract established neo-Nazis in their local community, which contributed to their involvement in the extremist right-wing scene.

The displaying of symbols with Nazi references serves multiple purposes. Clothes, music and symbols are used as a way of showing affiliation. Symbols are also used in a thought out manner by older members to give new-comers - who are not fully ideologically convinced about the cause - an experience, which makes the newcomer experience the world in a way which gradually instigates their identification with the frame of understanding and interpretations of the White Power Movement. I wish to give an example below, which shows how older and more experienced members, through carefully chosen means, can potentially initiate or push a motivated newcomer's radicalisation process. This is done by suggesting activities or action to a neo-Nazi-in-the-becoming, which potentially make him/her come to experience his daily life through an increasingly ideologically oriented perspective. I wish to bring forth this example from one of the informants, showing by which means, among others, he became gradually convinced, as he explained:

*'I was allowed to come to a party, when I was 12 years in a small town, and then I met skinheads from Stockholm and it was 'Stockholm Skins', they no longer exist, however. So then I started to go to Stockholm in between. And then it became more and more and because I was so young, so we learned that you have to hate the Jews and that one should hate all blacks and that homosexuality was a disease and, well, I considered it a little. Yet, at the same time, as they told, it was the Jews who control everything, they control the Democrats and the Democrats control the schools and the politicians. .. Then they said 'try to go to school with a White power T-shirt, then you will see that you will be asked to take it off, otherwise you're not allowed to get into the school'. And I tried it, and I came to the school, and I had a White Power T-shirt with a swastika on, and they (school teachers) came with a different T-shirt, 'put this on' or 'you will be banned and you cannot come back to the school for a certain time'.. and well, these older guys, what they said; they were right. They said if you do like this ...then you see that you are not allowed to think the way you like. But I was so young, so I did not understand that there are other ways you can think. But too bad, that I need to be 24 years, before I understood it' (interview transcript 2012)*

Neo-Nazi activities in Sweden are at present (2015) related to movements such as Svenskernes Parti (the Party of the Swedes<sup>25</sup>), which is an altered ver-

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.svenskarnasparti.se/> (01.10.2014)

sion of the National Socialist Front, the Nordfront (The North Front<sup>26</sup>), which is now the name of the web page for Svenska Modstånds rörelse (the Swedish Resistance Movement).

A very concrete example of how these movements manoeuvre in the Swedish society is the anti-immigration organisation Bevara Sverige Svenskt (Keep Sweden Swedish) headed by persons with Nazi and fascist backgrounds, who deliberately attempted to attract skinheads in the 1980s to be used in street actions and as bodyguards at meetings. In 1987, the organisation changed its style to suits and ties and established Sverigepartiet (the Sweden Party), which has today become part of the Swedish parliament under the name of Sverigedemokraterna (the Sweden Democrats) (ibid). Some of the members in parliament representing the Sverigedemokraterna are apparently members of Svenska Modstånds rörelse (Swedish Resistance Movement), indirectly giving voice to a movement based on the national socialist ideology of Nazi Germany - glorifying Adolf Hitler as well as the perception that females belong to the homely sphere and males to the public one<sup>27</sup>.

National Socialist subcultures are defined by their ideology, yet these groups also offer the participants a social community, which many would otherwise miss: powerful gang solidarity and an identity within one's own group (Lööv 1991 in Bjørge 1997). An aspect of getting involved with the neo-Nazi scene also entails, as one of my informants explained, the process of going from a self-perception of a marginalised loser to gradually perceiving oneself as a representative of the master race just by being white - and becoming a neo-Nazi. Becoming part of such groups can for the individual entail gaining a positive sense of self and experiencing belonging and acceptance, but for others there might be other reasons for their involvement.

## Eva, Olav, Erik, Joachim and Sandra - The informants and their involvement

To give an idea about the informants' entrance into the extremist right wing and their development in it, I wish to introduce the German sociologist Helmut Willems' classification of perpetrators of xenophobic violence into what, at a general level, could be defined as four types of participants. In the sense that the types or categories draw attention to what characterises their

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.nordfront.se/> (01.10.2014)

<sup>27</sup> <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=1650&artikel=6162254> (08.07.2015)

initial entrance into the extremist right wing. These four categories were originally used to explain individuals' legitimization of the use of violence (Bjørge 1997: 48 - 50, 2011: 280 - 283).

The informants' personal stories of involvement in the extremist right and their development within it correspond with the characteristics of participation in the four categories set up by Willems. But instead of using the four categories to classify perpetrators of xenophobic violence as Willems does, I wish to use them to illuminate the main types of traits that characterise the informants' initial participation and reason for joining and the sort of groups in which they have participated. I also wish to highlight how people can start in one category, yet gradually move on to a different one and for some end up by 'jumping borders' (Mørck 2015). In the sense that they jump from one type of extremist group into a different one, which has a slightly similar outlook and social organisation. Yet, providing a possibility for the individual to use competences and skills that he (it is mainly males) has developed as part of his involvement in the community of practice of an extremist group.

Through the classification I wish to point out that participation in an extremist group cannot be classified according to 'personality' or 'personal characteristic', but depends on a range of different factors. People change once they get involved in extremist groups, gangs, biker gangs and similar types of social organisation. They develop certain competences, which can be - and often are used - in other criminal networks when a participant grows tired, loses faith in the ideology or else - to which I shall return.

The different classifications show that individuals are diverse both in terms of social background, ways and reasons for getting engaged, motives for action and organisational affiliation and their development within the group. Willems' four types of perpetrators of xenophobic violence can, in a tangible way, differentiate the informants' reasons for involvement. The four categories are:

1. *The ideologically motivated right-wing extremist* is normally a member of an extremist organisation and plays the role as agitator in relation to less ideological youths. This type of activist is not distinguished by any particular 'negative' social characteristic such as unemployment or school dropout, but is often educated and holds a permanent job.

2. *The xenophobe or ethno-centrist* does not hold any firm right-wing extremist ideas or ideologies and is often a member of a youth subculture such as football hooligans or similar gangs or cliques. Although anti-foreigner sentiments and prejudices are widely held in these groups, they tend to distance themselves from right-wing extremist parties and organisations. Their feeling towards for-

eigners is characterised by feelings of having got less than their share, compared to all the privileges ‘foreigners’<sup>28</sup> are perceived to receive.

3. *The criminal and marginalised youth* can be distinguished from the other categories by a more troubled social background with a high frequency of school dropouts and unemployment. Their family backgrounds are typically single parent or divorced families, the parent drinks and/or has other abuse, and they use violence as a means of discipline and communication. They are not very ideological, but anti-foreign perceptions and attitudes are common. ‘Foreigners’ often play the role of scapegoats for these groups’ own problems.

4. *The fellow-traveler* neither holds particular right-wing extremist world views nor exhibits any pronounced anti-foreigner attitudes. People in this category are not characterised by private problems such as unemployment, school dropout or difficult social backgrounds. They are often found in groups of skinheads, loose youth gangs or cliques of friends and a strong sense of community and group solidarity play an important role in attracting them to these groups.

Informants in this study became involved in right-wing extremism for different reasons, but developed differently once they were involved, cutting across the above categories. I also think it is remarkable that out of the four types, only one is categorised as strongly ideologically orientated - the first one.

Of the 11 informants in this study who had all been part of a right-wing extremist group, only a few had been ideologically inspired before their entrance to the movements, whereas several of them would describe themselves as having had anti-foreign perceptions. The ones who had been ideologically orientated had grown up in families where part of the older generation had volunteered for Waffen SS during World War II. The informants had actively been introduced to Mein Kampf by older members of their families and had, through visits to Germany, met people who had been active Nazis during the Second World War. This had, according to these informants, instigated an ideological curiosity, which gradually brought them into contact with neo-Nazi organisations.

These individuals fall under category 1, as they were ideologically inspired and acted as catalysts for others by organising lectures on National Socialism for new members. They would be in steady jobs as tradesmen, but would also become involved in crime. One of the individuals went from getting involved in an extremist group to being an instigator to drift into a right-wing extremist

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<sup>28</sup> The quotation marks are used to indicate that the category foreigner does not necessarily indicate a person coming from abroad, but that it is somebody the individual group member perceives or comes to perceive as foreign.

terror organisation. Eventually, he gave it up and moved on to a different kind of criminal organisation for the purpose of gaining money and power, where he could use his criminal skills, understanding of the criminal world and his, as he explained, repudiated *violence capital*. At the same time, these informants also had difficult family backgrounds with substance abuse and divorced parents and would also emphasise in the interviews that they were searching for excitement through their involvement.

These informants are the oldest of the ones who were interviewed for this study. Their personal stories also reflect how being introduced to Nazi ideas and perceptions can be part of a family tradition, by family members creating a sense of normality around these ideas as well as introducing the person to people and networks revolving around Nazism. Such connections can instigate a person's engagement in the extremist scene, which is how one of the informants perceived it, but there might also have been multiple factors adding to these persons' engagements, such as difficult family relations, drifting in search of excitement and the search for status and identity combined tendencies in society at large (Bjørge 2009:32). Yet, these people had been young before White Power music became an entrance gateway to the movement.

The informants' different ways into the extreme right-wing movements have puzzled me as to whether their way into such organisations reflects (neo-) Nazism's position in Sweden in the 1980s as being transmitted through family members - before right-wing extremist ideas became promoted through music, concerts and other mainstream channels.

The rest of the informants could be placed in either category 2 - *the xenophobe or ethno-centrist* or category 3 *criminal and marginalised youth*, distinguishable from the other categories by a more troubled social background. They would be teenagers or in their 20s in the 1990's, yet some of them did not become involved before the year 2000 or later and had been seeking protection against bullying because of friends or in search of them. Yet, others would start out as hooligans and would gradually become introduced into more radical circles. One had moved from a left-wing oriented punk scene into the extremist right by getting protection from a guy from a neo-Nazi group against a black girl from his school who bullied him, which became his entrance to the White Power Movement. Yet, also having an extremely troubled background, becoming a neo-Nazi was also being as bad as it could be, as he explained. The informants would typically start in category 2 or 3, but five of the eleven informants - with backgrounds in the extremist right - would gradually move on to a very ideologically oriented position. Feelings of loneliness, marginalisation and a need for protection might have marked their way into the scene,

but were at a later stage transformed into a search for excitement and adrenaline kicks, combined with a strong ideological (Neo-Nazi) conviction, a combination which instigated criminal and attempted terrorist activities. Ironically, to become strongly ideologically convinced in a less organised group seems also to have the potential to make the individual give up on the group, because the rest of its members suddenly appear frivolous for the strongly ideologically convinced. This attitude can make the person search for a different sort of organisation, which again can be interrupted by army service or other obligations. This might force the individual to move and thereby open the person to other input, changing their life course to finally make them disengage, which I shall expand on in the articles.

Yet, one informant could be described as a fellow traveller as this person became involved by being in a relationship with a member of the right-wing extremist group The Order. She also explained that prior to her involvement with The Order, she had quite strong sentiments against foreigners.

The groups and networks in which the informants had been involved range from organisations corresponding to terrorist organisations such as Combat 18 to movements like the Svenska motståndsrörelsen (Swedish Resistance Movement) to less organised groups linked together by a shared ideology to mostly criminal and racist gangs or networks. Gangs and networks that seemed to offer community and excitement, but would also have a racist and extremist component as members would participate in the annual march in Stockholm, commemorating King Charles XII's death on 30 November, who, they claim is the warrior king of Sweden's glorious imperial past (Löow 1995). Engagement in right-wing extremist groups and networks can be an outcome of diverse factors, both at a personal level and a social level and can involve different courses for the individuals involved. The individual who disengages might require support to handle the process of deradicalisation. But what does it mean to become radicalised? This is the subjects of the next part 3.

## Part 3

### Radicalisation - a processual, contextual and relative term

*Radicalisation, extremism and terrorism* have since the terror attacks in New York in 2001, the bombing in Madrid 2004, London 2005, the attack in Utøya in 2010 and lately the attacks in Paris, Copenhagen, Tunisia, Kuwait and Somalia in 2015 made the subject (re)enter our everyday lives and perceptions.

The subjects are discussed in the media and are often discussed themes in political debates, as well as prevention of radicalisation and response to extremism and terrorism have become part of the European Union's<sup>29</sup> and various governments' plans<sup>30</sup> of action. The terms are contested because of their relative nature, yet still of central importance in this study.

I wish to clarify my understanding and use of *radicalisation, extremism and terrorism* as the content of these words refers to a position potentially prior to disengagement and deradicalisation. I also wish to exemplify that what makes someone being perceived as a *radical* changes over time. This is the reason why radicalisation needs to be understood with reference to a broader context, which also explains why we need to understand radicalisation as an outcome of a social processes rather than a personal characteristic.

That people become radicalised is nothing new, yet, what and who we perceive as radical varies, therefore, which groups or people that are perceived as being radical is always conditioned by mainstream society's perspective at a given time. The word refers in a rather unspecific way to an individual's views and/or action, which is perceived to diverge from a comparable mainstream, and thus only makes sense within a wider societal context. Therefore, the meaning of the concept changes throughout history (Schmid 2013) as well as from country to country.

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<sup>29</sup> [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release MEMO-15-3140\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-3140_en.htm) (15.07.2015)

<sup>30</sup> [http://www.stm.dk/multimedia/Et\\_st\\_rkt\\_v\\_rn\\_mod\\_terror.pdf](http://www.stm.dk/multimedia/Et_st_rkt_v_rn_mod_terror.pdf), <http://sm.dk/filer/nyheder/handlingsplan-om-forebyggelse-af-radikalisering-og-ekstremisme-tilgaengelig.pdf>, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2012/jun/sweden-counterterrorism-strategy.pdf> (15.07.2015)



The term was already in use in the 18th century and linked to the Enlightenment and the French and American revolutions, whereas 'radical' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century used to refer to a political agenda advocating thorough social and political reform. The term has also been applied to political parties in the 19th century who advocated issues as republicanism rather than royalism or some - in that context perceived as radicals - who plead for the precursor to a system of democracy, in which the right to vote was not linked to the possession of property or gender. Radicals' demonstrative public actions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in support of women being allowed to vote were often illegal but not illegitimate, certainly not by today's standards. This goes to emphasis that some of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's radical demands have become mainstream entitlements today and that the term has thus been used with reference to a context, which according to today's standard would not be perceived as radical in any way (ibid). Hereby also directing attention to the fact that radicalisation used to be associated with the motivator for positive social and political transformation, departing radically from the prevailing view (Barrelle 2010).

The brief historical frame emphasises the relativity of 'radical' as a concept and that it must always be positioned in relation to mainstream political activities, which also has an impact on the concepts of its derivatives: 'de-radicalisation' and 'counter-radicalisation' (Schmid 2013: 6-7) - which I shall expand on below.

Involvement in a radical group for some individuals implies developing a feeling of being different from ordinary people, not because they are essentially different, but because their frame of interpretation and understanding changes over time as an outcome of the involvement, which is part of the radicalisation process. Indicating why efforts to pathologise the terrorist have resulted in simplistic explanations that obscure the complexity (Horgan 2009:4).

The search for answers to questions of why people become radicalised have therefore in recent years moved from micro-level explanations and the effort to map presumed inherent qualities characterising individuals who become extremists and terrorists - in particular found in psychological studies focusing on the individual - in favour of a focus on group dynamics and processes (Horgan 2009). As it is doubtful that a profile could tell anything meaningful about why or how someone seeks to become involved in extremism and terrorism in the first place. It thus seems highly probable that any terrorist profile would rather be a reflection of the radicalisation process a terrorist has already gone through, than a characteristic of the individual (ibid). The main question also remains unsolved of how to - among the many radicals - identify the one who will move on to use violence without at the same time throwing suspi-

cion on whole groups of people. Such considerations also make it the more precarious when governments action plans against radicalisation and terrors as well as part of the scientific literature routinely characterise some people as being *vulnerable* to radicalisation. By looking closer at the possibilities for profiling based on the present experiences with radicals and/or extremists as an outcome of a process, it appears why profiling remains a blind alley, as expressed by Tore Bjørgo (20011: 278):

‘Profiling in order to identify specific individuals involved in terrorism or vulnerable to radicalisation into violence by narrowing down from a wider population turns out to be of limited use, producing too many false positives as well as false negatives: people who fit the stereotype of (potential) terrorists without being a (potential) terrorist; and real terrorists who go undetected because they do not fit the stereotype. Profiling of dimensions, processes and pathways is a far more promising approach [12:60, 13]. By understanding these various processes and pathways, there may also be some openings for identifying possible preventive interventions, which may be used to disrupt processes of radicalisation into violence and facilitating disengagement’.

A statement which again indicates the importance of the contextual by pointing to processes, which is why it has also become common to stress that becoming able to profile (potential) extremists or terrorists is very unlikely to happen (ibid). Yet, as Western societies’ experiences with especially Islamic terror have escalated in the last decade, politicians, investigators and practitioners involved in investigation and prevention of terrorist attacks have searched for the development of a checklist of qualities that will enable them to predict what the next terrorist is likely to look and act like. The outcome seems to be a shallow attention to radicalisation understood as a process of action - reaction - action - reaction.

Therefore, it also crucial to situate political violence in the broader spectrum of political action – persuasive politics, pressure politics and violent politics – by those holding state power as well as non-state actors. It is important to recognise that radicalisation is not a one-sided phenomenon, hence it is equally important to examine the role of state actors and their potential for radicalisation. A current example is how the US and their Western allies after 2001 and the beginning of the war against terror reintroduce the use of torture, kidnappings, imprisonment without trial (Guantanamo) and extra-judicial renditions<sup>31</sup>. These actions provide an equally radical turn, as the one they were

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.thetorturereport.org/>, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/investigation-prosecution-remedy-accountability-for-human-rights-violations-in-the-war-on-terror?page=4> (23.6.2015)

fighting against, through their drastic departure from democratic rule of law procedures and international human rights standards. These are indicative of the fact that in a polarised political situation, not only non-state actors, but also state actors can radicalise (Schmid 2013). The unwillingness in the West to perceive their action as equally a part of the radicalisation circle has been that the focus of government has tended to focus on ‘vulnerable’ youth. This concept seemingly refers to people perceived as somehow easier to radicalise than others. Such a micro-level and person-centred approach deflects attention from the role of a wider spectrum of factors (Schmid 2013:3) and reduces radicalisation to a personal social-psychological level.

An outcome of the one-sided focus is that mainstream media, governmental action plans and to some extent research literature<sup>32</sup> (Schmid 2013: iv) routinely follow the argument of ‘some people being more *vulnerable* to radicalisation than others’, often directing attention to youths in marginalised areas, immigrants or descendants.

In the recent election campaigns in Denmark (2015), Norway (2013) and Sweden (2014) politicians especially on the right - yet, in Denmark on both sides of the political spectrum<sup>33</sup> - tended to establish an interconnection to a stop to immigration from Syria, Africa or people in general crossing the Mediterranean to enter Europe - to a reduction of radicalisation and thus, I suppose, terrorism. Parties representing what prior to the end of the 1990s and 2000 was perceived as the far right, have in those three countries<sup>34</sup> gained increasing support and have been elected to parliament.

The importance of taking into consideration the contextual frame in relation to which radicalisation is defined becomes apparent in Berntzen and Sveinung’s (2014) study, as they show in a very convincing way how the surroundings inform the agents’ actions as well as our perceptions of their actions. Lars Erik Berntzen and Sveinung Sandberg (2014) thus explain Anders Behring Breivik’s acts of terror with the analytical concepts from social movement organisation (SMO) theories. SMO and its focus on framing and thus the broader perspective help us (re)draw attention to how the individual, in an almost hermeneutical circle, comes to perceive reality in a certain way through a gradual process of radicalisation. In their analyses, they include the individual,

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<sup>32</sup> ‘An exploration of the literature also confirms the pitfalls of profiling those individuals ‘likely’ to become terrorists. The current propensity to focus in the search for causes of radicalisation on ‘vulnerable’ young people has produced inconclusive results’ (Schmid 2013: iv).

<sup>33</sup> Debate between prime minister and Social Democrat Helle Thorning Schmidt and the party leader for the Liberal Party, Lars Løkke Rasmussen

<sup>34</sup> The same tendency is apparent across Europe - France with Le Front National, the Netherlands - present Partij voor de Vrijheid (Geert Wilders), the UK and Hungary.

the broader societal context and social movement organisations or micro, me-so and macro level to illustrate why Breivik should not be perceived as a lone wolf, because his terrorist attacks were inspired by well-known political rhetoric. By the use of framing theory - a Goffman (1974) concept of schemata for interpretation - they explain how Breivik's manifesto as well as his actions - are not reducible to:

‘the notion of lone wolves, along with their lack of social networks, mental disorders, and the tendency to “create their own ideologies”’ (Berntzen and Sveinung 2014:270).

On the contrary, they argue how Breivik's actions and manifesto are informed by a general anti-immigration scepticism in Norway against especially immigration from non-western countries. This was initially formulated in the 1970s by a wide variety of anti-Islamic movements - including the Progress party, and more central parts of the anti-Islamic movement include several minor and politically autonomous organisations, such as the independent think tank Human Rights Service (HRS) and more radical organisations such as the Norwegian Defence League (NDL) and Stop Islamisation of Norway (SIAN), which again is part of a transnational Stop Islamisation of Europe network, represented in 18 European countries. Breivik is both an extremist and a terrorist, yet his actions and the reason for them seem most likely to be embedded in, and motivated by, the rhetoric of larger social movements (ibid), which when added together - like a puzzle - end up potentially forming a given picture of reality that is reasonable to postulate have informed Breivik's actions, as they have helped him identify ‘who was to blame’<sup>35</sup>.

In spite of Breivik's attack on Utøya in 2010, which has been the biggest terrorist assault in Scandinavia since the Second World War, Islamic terrorism has become the main focus as well as the main target for prevention, intervention and rehabilitating work. The far and extremist right seem no longer to be in focus or perceived as a present danger.

Muslims and Islam have during the last decades been perceived, presented and compared by the far right within the parliamentary system to be equal to a totalitarian system in line with Nazism. Søren Krarup, a Danish politician, for example proclaimed in 2007<sup>36</sup> that the Muslim female headgear or veil was comparable to a Nazi symbol. Discourses like the above-mentioned and statements like Krarup's have over time - in some parts of the Danish popula-

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<sup>35</sup> A similar sort of analysis of Anders Behring Breivik's action (Bjorgo 2012) can be found at <http://modkraft.dk/artikel/hvordan-kan-man-forst%C3%A5-breiviks-handlinger> (21.08.2015)

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/debat/s%C3%B8ren-krarups-skr%C3%A5sikkerhed> (12.08.2015)

tion - positioned children of immigrants - born and raised in Denmark - as well as youngsters growing up in what have been termed ghettos in and across Scandinavia, Hizbut Tahrir and similar groups, people potentially going to or returning from the war in Syria as the new, and what is perceived to be dangerous radicals. The focus on issues which can be related to Islam seems at the same time to create a broader acceptance of *radical* Islam critics like Geert Wilders as well as the right-wing and Nazi-inspired organisations the Greek Golden Dawn. Both parties have for example in the summer of 2015 participated in a mainstream political gathering in Denmark. The reason for letting them participate was again with references to freedom of speech, an issue which is often presented in opposition to religious or Islamic values.

Issues like these have an impact on who is pointed out as being radical in the present and which groups in society are likely to (re)act.

Having established the context influencing 'radicalisation' as a concept, the personal accounts of disengagement from the individual having left the extreme right in this study, were introduced by a parallel story about the individuals' gradual radicalisation. The group became constitutive for their identity formation, revealing traits of how the specific individual came to identify him or herself as a Neo-Nazi or right-wing extremist.

To illustrate how I have come to understand being radical and radicalisation as indication of a process of gradual escalation and in this case, narrowing of a world view - which at one point might be radical, compared to mainstream views in a Swedish liberal democratic welfare state - I wish to add to Fathali M. Assaf Moghadam's model for a context-oriented radicalisation process.

Moghadam uses the metaphor of a narrowing staircase leading step-by-step to the top of a building, having a ground floor and five higher floors to represent each phase in the process that, at the top floor, ends in an act of terror. The ground floor - inhabited by average people - stands for a cognitive analysis of the structural and social circumstances in which the individual finds him - or herself. Here, the individual asks him- or herself questions generated by the political public discourse in historical-cultural times. It could be questions like 'am I being treated fairly? Or, 'am I getting my share compared to somebody else?'. The individual begins to interpret in interaction with his surroundings an ascribed causality to what he deems to be unjust. According to Moghadam, most people find themselves at this 'foundational level'. Some individuals who are very dissatisfied move up to the first floor in search for a change in their situation, or they might coincidentally meet somebody who gives them - in their eyes - a fair explanation of their situation and potentially how to change it. On the first floor, one finds individuals who are actively seeking to

remedy those circumstances they perceive to be unjust. Some of them might find that paths to individual upward social mobility are blocked, that their voices of protest are silenced, and that there is no access to participation in decision-making. They tend to move up to the second floor, where these individuals are directed toward external targets for displacement of aggression. The individual begins to place blame for injustice on out-groups, just like Arabs might point e.g. to Israel and the US. While people on the far right might point to ‘immigrants’ or people being perceived as such, as ‘threatening to take over the country’ - both are supported by the media coverage, social movement and other actors within their surroundings, adding fuel to their frame of interpretation and understanding. Some are simultaneously radicalised in mosques/political organisations/on the internet and at other meeting places of Muslims/far-to extreme right-wingers and move to the third floor on the staircase to terrorism. This phase involves a moral disengagement from society and a moral engagement within an extremist group and/or nascent terrorist organisation. Within this phase, values are constructed which rationalise the use of violence by the extremist while simultaneously decrying the moral authority of the groups, regime and/or dehumanisation of minority groups, immigrants or others being pointed out as legitimate targets. A smaller group moves up the narrowing staircase to the fourth floor, where the legitimacy of terrorist organisations is accepted more strongly. Here the attitude is: ‘you are either with us or against us’<sup>37</sup>, and a black and white world view is established, and a frame for action is taking shape. They begin to be incorporated into the organisational and value structures of terrorist organisations. Some are recruited to take the last steps on the staircase and commit acts of terrorism when reaching the top fifth floor (Fathali M. Assaf Moghadam in Schmid 2013: 24-25)<sup>38</sup>.

Radical views are thus views which deviate from the norms, yet, extreme in connection with the extremist right is as indicated above, when individuals start to perceive violence as a legitimate means to pursue political goals and approve the use of non-democratic measures such as threats, harassments and violence against political opponents and others perceived as inferior. Whereas terrorism<sup>39</sup> refers to the use of violence against arbitrary civilians with the in-

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<sup>37</sup> George W. Bush emphasised over and again; ‘that either you are with us or you are with the terrorist’, after the attack of 9/11 2001, again drawing attention to the importance of context and to include that states can express black and white world views and thus become agents instigating or be part of a negative radicalisation process, e.g. as part of the steps towards warfare.

<sup>38</sup> The model gives a very negative impression, though the first three floors might also have been illustrated with a social movement perspective, leading to a positive social change within society.

<sup>39</sup> Terror, terrorism and terrorist are also often used as part of a hegemonic agenda and thus asymmetrical way, which also reveals itself in what is described by Schmid (2013: 37) as: ‘one of the biggest

tention of scaring people and exerting pressure to achieve a political or ideological aim (Bovenkerk 2011). I wish to emphasise that being radical does not necessarily imply that the individual becomes an extremist, accepts the use of violence or in any way is or becomes a potential threat to society.

I understand radicalisation as in Fathali M. Assaf Moghadam's (2009) model, as the informants' radicalisation process appeared in their descriptions to have accelerated as the outcomes of their involvement with an extreme group, which they got involved in due to different reasons. Radicalisation thus seems to be a reflection of repeated social and psychological interactions with an ideology (however diffuse or unstructured), the community of practice it engenders, and the meaning that is derived by the individual from sustained involvement and engagement with a group and its activities (Horgan 2009: 8). Yet, I also wish to emphasise that the image of the step-by-step model is in reality - in my understanding - to a much lesser extent happening in such a straightforward development as the model conveys, leading all the time to a yet more radicalised level. Based on the interviews with EXIT's clients, the process seems much more to happen in a process, in which the individual take a step forward and then backward, because he/she will sometimes feel convinced only in the next moment to experiencing doubts about the cause. The reason why I do not agree with the stepwise development - in a linear move forward - is also because of many coincidental factors which, it is my impression, based on both the present study, as well as the one dealing with the Youth House Movement, make some people get involved.

Social interaction, participation in collective (violent) action and circulating stories are some of the general mechanisms making individuals - to varying degrees - identify with a social movement and/or a political group and the ideology at work within it (Snow et al. 1986, Tarrow 1994, Polletta 1998, Karpantschov 2007, Christensen 2009 a and b). To become radicalised is thus in no sense a particular option only for individuals involved in the extremist right, but is a potential for anybody involved in groups linked to an idealistic

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shortcomings of the literature on (counter-)terrorism is that so many studies have been blind to what the other side - the government - did and does at home and abroad. To illustrate this with an analogy from sport: If a reporter described a tennis match only in terms of what happens on one side of the net, we would rightfully complain that we got only half the story. When it comes to terrorism, such a one-sided discourse is, however, still widely accepted. Too many analysts have sought the causes of radicalisation only on the side of non-state actors. It might well be that many, perhaps even the majority of 'root causes' of radicalisation are indeed on one side of the net, but the almost systematic disregard for government counter-terrorist behaviour is nevertheless striking. Government actions and counter-terrorism policies (e.g. targeted assassinations, drone attacks, torture), can exacerbate a critical situation, causing radicalisation on the other side of the conflict or reinforcing existing radicalisation even further. There are a number of studies that focus on what has been termed 'blowback' but they have hardly influenced mainstream thinking on counter-terrorism'.

case, regardless of whether the ideology is right wing, Islamist, Christian or Jewish-fundamentalist, ethno-nationalist, revolutionary Marxist or environmental extremist or something else (Barrelle 2010). This is so as the psychological course the individuals are going through during the radicalisation process contains a number of common factors across diverse groups. Radicalisation; (1) is the outcome of a process, and (2) shall not be restricted to any one form of ideology-defined group (Barrelle 2010, 2014).

To sum up, I will finish this section by quoting Mark Sedgwick;

‘the best solution for researchers is probably to abandon the idea that ‘radical’ or ‘radicalisation’ are absolute concepts, to recognize the essentially relative nature of the term ‘radical’ and to be careful always to specify both the continuum being referred to and the location of what is seen as ‘moderate’ on that continuum’ (2010: 491 in Schmid 2013: 7).

## Disengagement, deradicalisation - and circumstances motivating individuals to disengage and/or deradicalise

Disengagement and the process leading to de-radicalisation are analysed in detail in the articles and illustrate why and how the process of leaving an extremist group is demanding, but also reveal different sorts of support that may help the individual in the process.

Implicit in most definitions of disengagement is the distinction between cognitive and behavioural components. John Horgan (2009, Bjørge and Horgan 2009) uses the term *behavioural disengagement* to refer to reducing or ceasing physical involvement in violent or radical activities, and the term *psychological disengagement* to refer to a shift in attitude or belief (Horgan, in: Barrelle 2010). The two definitions draw attention to, that former extremists may cease their violent or anti-social behaviour, but they may keep strongly anti-social ideas and political goals. The term *deradicalisation* is also a synonym for psychological disengagement.

In this thesis, *deradicalisation* refers to a shift in cognitive orientation and to bringing the individual to more moderate viewpoints. Mark Dechesne (2011) defines deradicalisation as ‘a systematic moderation of radical thoughts’...which includes an attempt to create the circumstances under which individuals become more open to alternative viewpoints. That certain circumstances have to be created to open the individual also tells that deradi-



calisation is not something which can be undertaken unless the individual is open for changes. As Mark Dechesne also points out, if there is no self-initiated openness to change beliefs, external attempts to moderate radical beliefs are unlikely to be successful' (2011:289).

*Disengagement* is used as a synonym for 'to leave' and as a stop to the physical involvement with the group. It was my impression that the informants among present and former clients in this study have ceased their involvement in violent activities of any sort when they left the group, while they were clients as well as afterwards. Yet, one of the coaches (himself a former neo-Nazi) - who had been involved in EXIT almost from the very beginning - explained that, long after he left the group, he continued his violent and criminal behaviour in secret as he could not identify with the positive image people suddenly had of him after he started telling his own story as part of lectures with a Holocaust survivor.

The development of an alternative identity is as complex a process as the initial radicalisations process, which led - the informants in this study - to develop an identity as extremist right-wingers, yet the development of an alternative identity to the extremist one seems to play a central role for a person's ability to completely disconnect from any further criminal trajectory.

In the articles I do not make a sharp distinction between the disengagement and deradicalisations and do not always differentiate as to whether disengaging also includes deradicalisation, because EXIT Sweden, unlike EXIT Deutschland, does not work directly with the ideological orientation of their clients. The decision has thus been informed by EXIT's way of approaching their clients and their lack of strictly defined concepts in this manner. I am under the impression that this is an outcome of the fact that their goal for their clients is to make them alter their identity by introducing them to alternative activities and spheres of life. Through this approach, EXIT thus seeks both to make them disengage and deradicalise without having an explicit standpoint on the interrelation of the two. I also speak of disengagement as a process, where I could also have used the term *psychological disengagement* as by *the disengagement process* I refer to the process of mentally and emotionally breaking with the movement after the clients have ceased their physical involvement.

It can be difficult to determine whether the informants have actually deradicalised, whereas the informants had disengaged in the sense that they had ceased their physical involvement in radical activities as otherwise they cannot stay with EXIT as clients.

The informants represent different versions of the disengagement and deradicalisation process. Some had stopped their involvement with the extreme right

ten years ago, whereas others had just completed a prison sentence because of activities and violence related to their involvement with the extreme right, and had only recently become clients when I met them, so they were at the very beginning of changing the course of their lives.

Deradicalisation is not a 'de-programming' or referring to a return to the state of 'pre-radicalisation', like the individual is assumed to be able to return to a sort of state before the individual became radical. This is not the case as will become evident in the articles; because the experience of having been part of an extremist group will always remain part of the particular individual's life story and experience. The process which (might) support the individual in nuancing their perceptions and thus alter their radical view - equalling a tendency to perceive issues in either black or white - happens in a gradual, piecemeal and at times contradictory process (Horgan 2009:157).

Disengagement, deradicalisation and social reintegration cannot be considered without regard for the context of their precursor radicalisation, which in a disengagement process needs to be addressed with respect to its specific socio-historical context (Barrelle 2010, 2014, Bjørge and Horgan 2009). Therefore, there are no programmes or support which fit all - which everybody involved in the research of this subject seems to agree on. Rather, a support of an individual in a disengagement process needs to respond to that particular individual's need and contextual experiences in order to have an impact (Bjørge and Horgan 2009, Bjørge 2001, Schmid 2013, Ramalingam and Tuck 2014).

## Factors that help or hinder disengagement

Before I discuss the different exit programmes in Northern Europe and elsewhere, I shall list the common factors that inhibit people from - as well as encourage them to disengage from radical groups as well as their reasons for it (Bjørge and Horgan 2009: 36-39, Barrelle 2014, 2014 A).

The factors inhibiting disengagement include positive characteristics of the group, e.g. strong ties of friendship and community, irrespective of a complete loss of faith in the ideology. Potential dropouts may also fear negative sanctions from the group and loss of protection against former enemies. Former enemies, such as militant anti-racist groups or violent immigrant youth gangs, do not necessarily believe or care whether the disengagement is genuine. People who leave extremist groups behind fear having nowhere to go (Bjørge 2009).

More institutional factors include negative sanctions from the criminal justice system. Some activists have committed serious crimes and fear that former comrades will tip off the police or that the police will put the individual under pressure to inform on accomplices. As well as the fear that career prospects are ruined as people also find it difficult to get a job after serving time in prison and having the stigma of Nazism.

Reasons for individuals' disengagement are divided into *push* and *pull* factors; *push* factors relate to negative social forces and circumstances that make it unattractive to remain in a particular social environment, whereas *pull* refers to factors attracting the person to a more rewarding alternative (Bjørge 2009: 36 - 43). Push factors are *negative social sanctions* causing some who join racist groups to reconsider their engagement. Other reasons include *the loss of faith in the ideology and politics of the group*.

*The feeling of things going too far*, especially in terms of violence, is yet another reason to leave the group, as is *disillusion with the inner working and activities of the group*. One common issue is that the group is more involved in drinking beer than in serious political work. The final push factor is *being exhausted and unable to take the pressure*, because life as a (right-wing) extremist is demanding and many experience emotional and physical burnout.

Pull factors - factors perceived as more attractive, pulling the individual to desire a change - include *a longing for the freedom of a normal life*, even though normal life also appears dull, flat and empty without the excitement of the struggle and fights with real and perceived enemies. At some point, activists feel *they are getting too old for what they are doing* and fear jeopardizing *career prospects and personal futures*, and finally one of the strongest motivations for leaving life as a (militant) extremist is *the establishment of a family with new responsibilities* (Bjørge 2009). During this study, I have encountered all these reasons for individuals' giving up on life as a right-wing extremists and seeking support within EXIT.

Kate Barrelle (2014) has in her Ph.D.; 'Pro-Integration: Disengagement and life after extremism' developed a new model - the pro-integration model PIM. Through five themes the model conceptualises disengagement from violent extremism and the individual's subsequent reintegration into society. The five themes are very similar to the above mentioned *push* and *pull factors*, as Barrelle identifies 'disillusionment with leaders' and 'disillusionment with group members' as the prime factors for disengagement, whereas 'physical and psychological issues', 'reduction in group identity', 'disillusionment with radical ideas' and 'methods' are contributing factors. After disengagement the model establishes 'relations with others' (outside the group), 'coping and skills', 'social

support' and the importance of developing a 'different social identity', 'change in ideology' and 'prosocial engagement in society' - as crucial for the individual's successful reintegration into society. The present research does not only re-confirmed those themes, but furthermore provides answers to why and in which particular ways, these themes are essential in the process following disengagement and the individuals potentially de-radicalisation and re-integration in society, which is the subject of the articles and which are identified in the conclusion.

## Part 4

### Exit programmes targeting right-wing extremists in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Germany

It is hot, but it is not new, even though the increased number of publications on the topic suggests that deradicalisation is a modern invention, it was already applied in the seventies. The PLO dismantled its Black September and brought them to a more moderate path through methods that resemble those of deradicalisation. The British government experimented with temporary prison leaves and vocational training as ways to bring back IRA convicts to civil society, and the Italian government used special repentance laws to facilitate Red Brigade members to abandon the organisation (Dechesne 2011).

This section presents programmes in Northern Europe both to show differences and similarities in the programmes as well as to place EXIT Sweden within a trend, when it was established in 1998. This is followed by a section in which I give a brief preface to programmes elsewhere in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia, especially zooming in on programmes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Singapore targeting Islamist detainees.

To summarise the deradicalisation efforts can be divided into three types: (i) individual ideological deradicalisation, using psychological and religious counselling to produce a change of mind, and (ii) collective deradicalisation, using political negotiations to obtain a type of change of behaviour (e.g. ceasefire, decommissioning of arms) (Schmid 2013:41) (iii) individual ideological deradicalisations using psychological counselling and activities to engage the individual in new social situations and sorts of interaction targeting his/her embodied knowledge. An example for the first approach would be the efforts undertaken by the government of Singapore, EXIT Germany (to some extent only), while the second approach has been utilised in Egypt, and the third is applied by EXIT Sweden, Saudi Arabia and EXIT Denmark - I suppose. Even though it remains difficult to estimate in which kind of activities the detainees are engaged in Saudi Arabia, and, more importantly, the specific purpose of those

activities, due to the lack of detailed empirical data. This is also the case with EXIT Denmark, Norway and the Aarhus Model, which I shall describe below. Terrorism and extremism are always specific to their local culture and political setting as the groups' (re)actions are 'answers' directed at specific issues represented by identified groups of people and institutions in specific cultural-historical settings. The strengths of disengagement programmes therefore seem to derive from their ability to meet the social needs of the one disengaging and the initiatives need to be able to represent alternative perspectives and possibilities, corresponding to the given political, cultural and social context. For programmes to be successful, they thus need to have a solid understanding of the political, social and cultural context in which individuals have been involved and on behalf of which they have acted. The implication of this is that programmes, models or practices that work in one country will not necessarily prove beneficial in a different one (Bjørge and Horgan 2009, Barrelle 2014).

Not only do exit strategies need to correspond with regional and local issues, the understanding that terrorist groups may consist of different types of individuals who undergo diverse paths of radicalisation also indicates that it is necessary to develop several specific measures, which can be made to fit each separate type of individual. Some individual might be susceptible to socio-economic interventions, others to psycho-social factors and others to ideological and political issues, depending on the reason or fulfilment of their involvement. Thus, strategies have to be tailored to the specific drivers behind each main type of activist and the specifics of the various groups (Bjørge 2011:279-280).

While the context may vary, and there are surely differences to types of terrorist and extremist, there still exist common psychological denominators in the processes that individuals go through when they disengage. These are feelings of being in a social vacuum, emptiness and loneliness, traumas, anxiety and depression. The informants of not only this study, but also studies conducted by Bjørge, indicate that the individuals often have to deal with violent impulses, lack of confidence, paranoia, substance abuse and a criminal record (Bjørge 2009:140). Yet, again it must be suspected that these general denominators only leave us with a sort of profiling of the problems, which people leaving extremist groups can be expected to have to deal with or are in need of support to handle. Yet, the individual's needs and feelings cannot but be expressed in a social and cultural informed way, taking us back to the contextual and diverse outlook of different programmes.

The methods used by EXIT are exemplary for a number of similar programmes across Europe with a tailored programme for each individual (Bjørge, 2009, Froukje Demant, Wagenaar and Donselaar 2009 in Barrelle 2010), yet are very different from programmes targeting Islamists, who are often addressed as a group in a collective deradicalisation process. EXIT Sweden, though, seems also to be different in their ways of making the individuals engage in diverse activities with the specific goal of helping the individual develop alternative ways of acting, which is, I believe, crucial. I shall expand on this in the final section in the preface.

Since EXIT is located in Sweden, I first wish to focus on exit programmes in Northern Europe, more particularly in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Germany. The four countries have very different histories of politically motivated violence and have developed different strategies to prevent recruitment to extremist groups. Sweden and Germany have established specific programmes - which are not linked to the secret service and the police - to support those who have already been involved and wish to disengage, whereas Denmark started a project in 2007, which is based on cooperation between the social welfare system and the police, as did Norway in the 1990's. Denmark has especially paid attention to preventive measures, yet a non-governmental organisation (NGO) - a counterpart - to Fryshuset Sweden has been established in 2015. Fryshuset Denmark is based on cooperation with the Swedish EXIT and linked to the Swedish Fryshuset<sup>40</sup>. Other European countries like the Netherlands have successful programmes, while countries like the UK have not developed programmes targeting right-wing extremists, but focus on preventive measures<sup>41</sup>.

All four countries have in their response to issues linked to the extremist right involved a mixture of private initiatives and NGOs that collaborate with public institutions like ministries, municipalities, the police, the secret service and the prison service. Below, I shall present a brief description of each country's strategy in relation to prevention, disengagement and deradicalisation.

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<sup>40</sup> Prevention, Radicalisation and Extremism - The Government's Action Plan 2014.  
<http://sm.dk/filer/nyheder/handlingsplan-om-forebyggelse-af-radikalisering-og-ekstremisme-tilgaengelig.pdf> (12.12.2014)

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/530/european-counter-radicalisation-and-de-radicalisation-a-comparative-evaluation-of-approaches-in-the-netherlands-sweden-denmark-and-germany> (12.07.2015)

## Norway

The first exit project aimed at extremist groups was initiated by Professor Tore Bjørgo of the Norwegian Police University College in Norway in collaboration with a group of concerned parents and youths who had been members of militant racist groups in mid-1997. Tore Bjørgo was writing a doctoral dissertation about racist and right-wing violence in Scandinavia, when he realised that two of his contacts wanted very much to leave the movement (Stern 2014). The exit project and the idea of facilitating disengagement from extremist groups were eventually taken over by the police, the Security Service and municipal youth workers (ibid).

Tore Bjørgo's approach to youth involved in right-wing extremist groups is that they mainly become ideologically convinced because of their involvement. They are thus perceived to get engaged primarily for other reasons than a political interest or motivation - yet acknowledging that an initial ideological orientation can also be the reason for some individuals to join. These individuals are undergoing a particular type of radicalisation process as they are often charismatic persons motivated by idealism and a strong sense of justice, responding to the suffering of others— where the need to take action gradually becomes a political or religious duty depending on the orientation of the group (Bjørgo 2001:280).

Programmes inspired by Bjørgo's approach thus place the main importance on social issues as a reason for the individuals' participation and focus on group dynamics as the root cause of the individuals' radicalisation process (Bjørgo 1997: 2009).

The main objective of the first exit project was to facilitate disengagement from racist and extremist youth scenes by:

- Supporting young people who want to disengage from racist or other violent groups.
- Supporting parents with children in racist or violent groups and establishing local networks for parents.
- Developing and disseminating knowledge and methods to professions working with youth associated with violent groups (Bjørgo, Donselaar and Grunenberg 2009: 135)

The Norwegian Exit project worked through local agencies by providing them with relevant know-how and methods. One of the lessons learned from the Norwegian case was that intervention can have a significantly stronger impact



if public agencies collaborate and coordinate their efforts among themselves and with community organisations and NGOs. Another outcome was the insight that in order to get rid of local racist youth groups, it is necessary to find ways to reintegrate young participants into society (Bjørge 2006) thus addressing radicalisation as outcomes of political processes also.

Norway has, apart from Anders Behring Breivik in 2011, not experienced any major problems with right-wing extremism.

## Sweden

EXIT was established in 1998 as part of Fryshuset, based on inspiration from the Norwegian project with similar goals and approaches to the radicalisation process and individuals' reasons for participation, as mentioned above. The founder of EXIT, Kent Lindahl and the staff members were to start out with mostly former members of neo-Nazi oriented groups or the White Power Movement, which is not the case to the same extent in 2014.

EXIT is a self-help programme, based on individuals' personal motivation to disengage, which is regarded as crucial for the clients' ability to leave the extremist right, both mentally and socially. EXIT works closely with psychiatrists, therapists, social workers, teachers and police, who are well-informed about the extremist right-wing scene and the difficulties facing individuals leaving the White Power Movement.

Because of privacy regulations, former clients are not kept track of in a systematic way when their contact with EXIT ends, making it difficult to control the below-mentioned figures (ibid 2009). According to an evaluation<sup>42</sup> of EXIT from 2010, the investigation shows that the organisation has provided support for approximately 600 individuals leaving the neo-Nazi environments, but it is unknown whether some individuals return to the movement. However, the present study indicates that individual support generates reflection, addresses embodied knowledge and unreflected habits and that the development of new social skills and insights makes the individuals cease further participation and prevent a return to a criminal and extremist lifestyle, in the sense that clients do not have any particularly greater risk of getting (re-)involved in a political extremist scene than any other person.

One of the strengths of the Swedish model is the prominent role of former participants on the extremist right-wing scene, because they have first-hand experience of what kind of assistance is needed and the credibility to establish

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<sup>42</sup><http://www2.ungdomsstyrelsen.se/butiksadmin/showDoc/ff80808127e2ac190128babe13ef003c/wwwEXITrapport>

contact (Bjørøg 2009). Another strength is the approach inherent in EXIT's goal for their clients of altering their identity, instead of working according to a model targeting - bringing matters to a head - either ideology or social needs. People at EXIT with a past on the extremist scene increasingly acquire formal education in therapeutic approaches and a specific practice of working with clients. EXIT's coaches also follow - and I shall expand on this in the articles - the extremist right-wing development and ideological focus in order to be able to follow the clients' references and agenda.

EXIT has developed a five-stage description of the process a person typically goes through when leaving the movement until the individual has reestablished him or herself in society. The five stages are:

- *The phase of motivation:* the person is still part of the extremist right wing, but has started questioning his/her involvement. They contact EXIT, who provides information, answers questions and probe the possibilities for disengagement and assistance.
- *The phase of disengagement:* the person has made the decision to leave the White Power scene, and some have quit when they contact EXIT. Potentially exposed to threats from former friends, and without a social network, this is a chaotic period. They need help to assess the threat situation in a realistic way and someone to talk to about doubts, fears, problems and the future is all-important at this stage. The coaches from EXIT are available by phone around the clock and may serve as guides to social agencies and public institutions.
- *The phase of establishment:* the break is complete, and the person has a place to live, some have a job, studies or some other day-time activity. They have cut the contact with the extremist right-wing scene and former friends and exist in a social vacuum, often feeling empty and alone. At this stage, the coach provides support to enter 'normal' life through joint activities.
- *The phase of reflection:* at this stage, the person starts to realise what they have been involved in during their time in the extremist right wing, such as violence, crimes, extreme ideologies of hatred and recruitment of others into similar activities. Some experience problems with anxiety, depression, insomnia or substance abuse. Some need help to deal with violent impulses, traumas or lack of confidence. EXIT provides contact to therapists. Most of the racist thoughts and impulses have disappeared during this process.

- *The phase of stabilisation:* at this stage, the person has achieved a ‘normal’ life, with job, studies and a network. They have turned away from hatred, racism, crime and substance abuse - yet, they still fear that their past will ruin their future and often feel guilt and shame. EXIT no longer works actively with the person, but many former clients keep in touch with their coach. EXIT’s involvement can last anywhere from six months to several years (Bjorgo, Donselaar and Grunenberg 2009: 135).

These five steps are general stages in a process, which is rarely a linear development with clear-cut turning-points and easy identifiable steps, but rather happens in a process where the individual moves back and forth between the different phases, interrupted by relapses into old patterns of behaviour and thought, until the client has established a new life and identity. EXIT’s model is also being applied on defectors from (biker) gangs, and staff consider developing a programme targeting individuals who have been involved in extreme Islamic oriented groups, as they are perceived to be in need of similar support as former neo-Nazis.

## Denmark

Denmark has mainly focused on preventive measures in their response to political extremism. Traditionally, the state has not struggled with right-wing extremism, but rather street fights and upheavals linked to the extremist left-wing movement (Karpantschof 2007, Karpantschof and Mikkelsen 2002, Christensen 2009).

In 2007, the pilot project "Deradicalisation - Targeted Intervention" was tried out and afterwards became established. The project is developed in close co-operation between the Police Intelligence (PET), East Jutland Police and the municipalities of Copenhagen and Aarhus. The project aims to develop methods to reach out to those perceived as being *in danger of becoming* engaged in political and religious extremism, to help young people who are involved in extreme groups - both left, yet mainly right-wing and Islamist. This is done by developing tools that can give the young person individual and potentially long-term support as well as advice that help him or her to get out of or distance themselves from extremism. In 2011, the programme also started to focus on people potentially going to - or returning from - the war in Syria. The ‘Aarhus Model’ is now an established outcome of the project, and the effort relies to some extent on the Dutch thinking behind the "Wij Amsterdam-

mers", which was a project against discrimination and radicalisation among the citizens of Amsterdam (terminated in 2011). Radicalisation is introduced in the crime prevention work as a risk factor, in line with other behavioural parameters - e.g. school absenteeism, abuse and challenging behavior<sup>43</sup>, and the model is thus implemented as a complement to the existing crime prevention efforts for young people up to 25 years.

The model incorporates issues and conflicts linked to discrimination, both at an individual and structural level as well as marginalisation and considers discrimination as the largest single contributing factor to radicalisation<sup>44</sup>. The plan thus acknowledges the contextual nature of radicalisation - unlike the governmental action plan 2014 with its heavy focus on *vulnerable* individuals<sup>45</sup>. The Aarhus model is, like the Norwegian one, linked to already established local authority initiatives and already existing crime-preventing measures in cooperation with the social system and system of justice<sup>46</sup>. The strategy is, when working preventively as well as when focusing on the individual, to take into account structural and contextual matters, a group-related orientation and specific action addressing individual issues - including the use of mentors to support youngsters who, as the plan explicate, 'often lack basic life skills'<sup>47</sup> - which, like in EXIT Sweden, is perceived as being instrumental in them getting engaged in and remaining in extremist circles. Yet, the main focus in the model seems to be dialogue with youth, their parents and lecture and information targeting schools and high schools.

Beside these approaches, Fryshuset Sweden has expanded its initiatives to Denmark<sup>48</sup> and in cooperation with - EXIT and PASSUS - a Danish Fryshus has been established in 2015, targeting young people and like Sweden - with a particular focus on marginalised youngsters. Fryshuset Denmark does also target political extremists - without the strict focus EXIT Sweden has on extreme right-wingers and gang members. Fryshuset in Denmark has developed

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<sup>43</sup><https://www.aarhus.dk/~media/Dokumenter/MBU/VI/SSP-DTO/Radikalisering/Beskrivelse-af-pilotprojekt---forebyggelse-af-radikalisering-osv.pdf> (1.7.2015) and 'Afradikalisering Måltrettet intervention' - kontoret for Demokratisk Fællesskab og Forebyggelse af Radikalisering 2011.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.aarhus.dk/da/omkommunen/organisation/Boern-og-Unge/PA/PI/SSP/Forebyggelse-af-radikalisering-og-diskrimination-i-Aarhus.aspx> (01.07.2015)

<sup>45</sup> Prevention, Radicalisation and Extremism - The Government's Action Plan 2014. <http://sm.dk/filer/nyheder/handlingsplan-om-forebyggelse-af-radikalisering-og-ekstremisme-tilgaengeligg.pdf> (12.12.2014) and personal conversation with Thorleif Link Detective Inspector of the East Jutland Police and Forebyggelse af radikalisering i Aarhus.pdf (25.06.2015)

<sup>46</sup> Prevention, Radicalisation and Extremism - The Government's Action Plan 2014. <http://sm.dk/filer/nyheder/handlingsplan-om-forebyggelse-af-radikalisering-og-ekstremisme-tilgaengeligg.pdf> (12.12.2014) and personal conversation with Thorleif Link Detective Inspector of the East Jutland Police and Forebyggelse af radikalisering i Aarhus.pdf (25.06.2015)

<sup>47</sup> Forebyggelse af radikalisering i Aarhus.pdf p. 5 (01.07.2015)

<sup>48</sup> <http://danmark.fryshuset.se/> (25.06.2015)

a mentor programme, which engages both individuals with a past in gangs as well as employees without a past in criminal or/and extreme gangs<sup>49</sup>. The mentors with a past in gangs are involved - like in Passus, Sweden - in developing the practice of the programme as they are used in conflict-negotiating with gangs if they will not let go of an individual and keeps on threatening and following the individual. According to the leader of Fryshuset in Denmark, Søren Lerche Mørck<sup>50</sup>, mentors with a past in gangs and extremist groups are regarded as 'street-smart', pointing to their insider and embodied knowledge of gang culture, which is crucial for the development and legitimacy of such programmes, a focus on which I shall expand in great detail in the articles about EXIT - 3,4,5, and 6.

The Danish effort to handle radicalisation and extremism has been extended, which is described in the governmental plan 'Prevention of Radicalisation and extremism - The government's action plan 2014'<sup>51</sup>. The plan comprises three levels, the first one details a general preventive focus by developing children's and youngsters' social skills, critical sense and responsibility in institutions such as schools, day-care facilities and other institutions working with children and youngsters.

The next level is described as preemptive, aimed at people categorised by the Danish word '*sårbar*', which can mean both being vulnerable - or exposed - to, in this context, radicalisation and being at risk of recruitment to extremist circles. The third level is the intrusive efforts directed at people who are very active in extremist circles, or are, as it is described, *deemed/estimated* to be at risk of trying to carry out violent or other criminal acts.

The three levels are divided into overall objectives. The aim is to strengthen authorities' way of handling so-called *signs of concern* of radicalisation and taking preventive action. The plan underlines that the purpose is to develop preventive measures aimed at people, for whom there is a *concern* or who are perceived as *being at risk of* becoming part of extremist environments.

Even though it is acknowledged in the plan for 'Prevention of Radicalisation and Extremism' (ibid) that radicalisation and extremism are most probably an outcome of social processes, the prevention is still linked to the identification of signs. The measures are - in spite of the explicit understanding described in the plan of the social process - informed by the idea that it should be possible to identify people who are not yet extremist, but *in danger of* radicalisation. This

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<sup>49</sup> Personal conversation with Søren Lerche, leader of Fryshuset Denmark (2014 and 2015)

<sup>50</sup> Personal conversation 25.6.2015

<sup>51</sup> <http://sm.dk/filer/nyheder/handlingsplan-om-forebyggelse-af-radikalisering-og-ekstremisme-tilgaengeligt.pdf> (12.12.2014).

is supposed to be carried out by looking for individuals who are perceived as at *'risk of'*, or show *'signs'* which are defined as of *'concern'* and/or demonstrate *'risk behaviour'*. The formulation does, as mentioned above, follow the argument of particular individuals as more *vulnerable to radicalisation* than others. Thereby, it is implicitly assumed that some individuals are sort of prone to being more at *risk of* becoming radicalised than others. An argument highly questioned in, and not supported by, research on the subject as the approach almost exclusively addresses radicalisation as a socio-psychological concept and thus avoids the macro-political and social side of the issues involved. A crucial question to ask is then how to explain why people who are exposed to similar conditions, as those who become terrorists, why do the others not radicalise or not fully or at any rate not enough to become terrorists? (Schmidt 2013) If people in certain areas or living under certain conditions are supposed to be more *vulnerable* than others to radicalisation. Part of the prevention plan is aimed at people who *demonstrate signs of* radicalisation, without further explanation. The Danish action plan thus aims at implementing preventive measures as well as exit opportunities for people who are already involved. The approach conveys the image that if the national net targeting potential extremists and terrorists is fine-meshed, then those 'particular' people who are perceived as being at *risk of* radicalisation can be identified in time to prevent their recruitment to extremist circles, and thereby attacks can be prevented. These notions, which are implied in the Danish action plan, are disturbing with regard to civic rights and the potential for discrimination against Muslims with a still stronger focus on Islamists. Tinka Veldhuis and Jorgen Staun (2009 in Schmid 2013: 33) noted in this context:

“it is difficult to point out societal groups as being more vulnerable to radicalisation than others. First, the proportion of Muslims who radicalise is too small to be categorized into social – vulnerable – groups. Statistically, Islamist terrorists in the West have been young, male, and relatively well educated (e.g. Bakker, 2006). This does not mean that young, male, well-educated Muslims are more vulnerable to radicalisation, let alone that policy makers should target this group on which to focus counter-radicalisation policy. [...] We argue that it is crucial for policy makers to move away from the question of which groups are likely to radicalise, but instead ask under what conditions individuals become more likely to radicalise’

Making the Danish approach even more questionable is, as Bjørgo and Horgan (2009) emphasise, the extremely complex connection between radical and even extremist expression and violent attacks as well as the relation between

why it happens, with whom and under which circumstances. Take for example cases such as those of;

“Richard Reid, the ‘shoe bomber’ who attempted to blow himself up on board a transatlantic flight in 2001. He converted to Islam while imprisoned at a Young Offenders Institution in England, but many believe that his interest in Al Qaeda only started when he became involved with a group of extremists at Brixton Mosque. The same can be said of Jose Padilla, the American terrorist who was accused of plotting to detonate a ‘dirty bomb’. He converted to Islam in prison, but followed a moderate interpretation of that faith until his release. His radicalisation is said to have been prompted by a friend whom he had met at a local mosque. Both cases are frequently held up as evidence of prison radicalisation, yet – under closer scrutiny – turn out to have little to do with prison (Neumann 2010:27)

There are also examples of subjects who distance themselves from the extremist group and its violent means, but retain their extremist views on society and, as mentioned above, other people readjust their value system to fit their new patterns of behaviour (Bjørge and Horgan 2009:3)

Finally, one might also ask who is to decide when somebody, who has not resorted to violence, is to be assessed as *radical* to an extent for it to become a *sign of concern*? And what are the consequences of people being regarded as *at risk* of being radicalised in relation to, for example, school systems, the social system, the police, local authorities, etc.? Not to mention how non-violent sorts of protest, e.g. civil disobedience, can become suspicious, potentially restricting democratic protest, thus limiting opposition to the status quo. The perception inherent in the Danish government’s approach to radicalisation unfortunately convey the impression that the government perceives extremists and terrorists as having particular profiles, which has, as mentioned above, been given up in research on the subject (Bjørge and Horgan 2009, Bjørge 2011, Horgan 2009, Barrelle 2014, Christensen 2009, Karpantschof 2009, Dalsgaard-Nielsen 2013).

## Germany

The way in which countries have been affected by extremism has a tangible impact on the formulation of policies and programmes designed to prevent or reduce the impact of radicalisation<sup>52</sup>. The German state is struggling with more organised extreme right-wing groups than any other European country.

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<sup>52</sup> <https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/530/european-counter-radicalisation-and-de-radicalisation-a-comparative-evaluation-of-approaches-in-the-netherlands-sweden-denmark-and-germany> (25.06.2015)

As mentioned above, radicalisation happens in a situated context, as Daniel Köhler, previous Director of Research at the Institute for the Study of Radical Movements (ISRM) - which runs EXIT Germany - describes how some individuals in their programme are an outcome of Nazism running in the family, making some of their clients the 4th generation of Nazis<sup>53</sup>.

J. Jahn, Press Officer of the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, estimates that there were 22,150 right-wing extremists in Germany in 2012, almost half of whom the intelligence service considers to be violence-prone (Stern 2014). EXIT Germany has also identified some of the costs incurred by the police and criminal justice system associated with far-right activity. A single far-right demonstration on 23 February 2013, attended by around 100 neo-Nazis, cost the Pforzheim Police €700,000 to manage. On this basis, a neo-Nazi activist that attends five similar demonstrations per year could result in annual policing costs of up to €350,000<sup>54</sup>.

Since 2003, projects have been established targeting disengagement and deradicalisation, and Germany has a range of programmes preventing right-wing extremism. These are run by federal or regional security services, by the national police, various ministries and NGOs.

In this context, I will focus on the programme EXIT Germany (for further information on different programmes in Germany, see Bjørgo 2009: 140- 150 and Köhler 2014).

EXIT Germany was the first disengagement programme in Germany established with inspiration from EXIT Sweden by criminologist Bernd Wagner and the ex-neo-Nazi Ingo Hasselbach in 2000. EXIT Germany is an NGO with a loose network of partners (Köhler 2014), targeting three issues: assistance to individuals, family help and community coaching and campaigns against Nazism.

Individuals must contact EXIT themselves, and the first step in the process is outlining the individuals' profile, and estimating potential problems and threats to the person is of great importance. EXIT Germany adds significant attention to dealing with the ideological orientation of the individuals - even if he or she has not (yet) resorted to violence - because, as Köhler<sup>55</sup> writes:

'Radicalized individuals do not need to understand and know every philosophical aspect of their ideology but they do have a general sense of correct and incorrect behaviour while being part of the milieu and group (i.e. collec-

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<sup>53</sup> Lecture at Grundtvighøjskolen 2012

<sup>54</sup> [http://www.strategicdialogue.org/ISD\\_EXIT\\_Report\\_September2014.pdf](http://www.strategicdialogue.org/ISD_EXIT_Report_September2014.pdf) (01.07.2015)

<sup>55</sup> Former Director of Research at the Institute for the Study of Radical Movements (ISRM), which is part of EXIT Deutschland, at present he is Director of the German Institute on Radicalisation and Deradicalisation Studies (GIRDS) in Berlin (25.06.2015).



tive identity), and while adhering to a specific ideology. Of course radicalization in this sense is a rather normal phenomenon in society, e.g. in sports, or dietary preferences (veganism for example). The important link here is the fusion with a certain type of ideology that inherently denies individual freedom (or equal rights) to persons not part of the radical person's in-group. Only in this combination (i.e. behaviour determined by ideology based on inequality) we have to recognize a radicalization process -even if non-violent at the moment as a threat to a democratic and pluralist culture, as well as a path that needs to be interrupted by various, individually tailored methods' (Köhler 2014:124).

Kölher's thus points to how a non-violent ideological orientation in a German context is considered a threat to democratic society, which supposedly are a result of the German history with Nazism. Legislation across countries varies a great deal as some countries do only prohibit (radical) behaviour and acts, whereas others do also forbid radical but nonviolent anti-democratic groups and expressions (Barrelle 2014).

Köhler in the above mentioned quote also introduces a rather direct link between ideological orientations and behaviour, on which I shall expand below as it can be considered problematic in the light of the very complex relation between extremist views and e.g. (violent) behaviour (Horgan 2009, Bjørge and Horgan 2009).

Problems related to social networks and psychological issues are also targeted in the initial phase by EXIT Germany because the dropouts have lost their friends and have given up the extremist right-wing ideology and world view which gave them a positive self-image (Bjørge, Donselaar and Grunenbergh 2009: 135). EXIT Germany focuses on the individuals coming to terms with the extreme right-wing ideology they have followed, the crimes they have committed and the development of empathy with their victims and the impact of their deeds on their victims' lives. They also address the view of the government as an enemy. Yet, at a different level, EXIT Germany also supports the individuals by handling issues such as drug abuse, family therapy, job training etc. (Köhler 2014:125). Since 2011, EXIT Germany has - with inspiration from their EXIT programme - established the programme HAYAT, targeting the so-called 'Foreign Fighters', Western citizens travelling to various battlefields in Syria in particular. They have diverse national and biographical backgrounds and join the fights in Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan and elsewhere. HAYAT offers counselling to family members through a 24 hour hotline.

# EXIT programmes targeting Islamic extremists in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Singapore

Many countries in the Middle East and Asia involved in counterterrorism efforts have also established rehabilitation and disengagement programmes in an attempt to fight against terrorism, which is perceived as a “war of ideas” (Al-Hadlaq 2011). Yet, there are enormous differences between Asia and the Middle East as regions as well as across each country; culturally, socially, historically and politically. It is fair to describe the Middle East as facing issues which cannot be reduced to what in a superficial presentation could be categorised as divergent perceptions. The Middle East are in 2015 facing even worse issues than before the Arab spring, which are contributing factors to a radicalisation process. The issues are a general lack of governmental legitimacy across the region as well as the widespread poverty, extreme inequality among religious groups and gender, widespread corruption, restricted political rights and regular human rights violations (El-Said 2012:20), not to mention the war in Syria, Iraq and the advancement of Islamic State and its extreme and gruesome conduct.

These issues are well beyond the scope of this thesis; nonetheless I shall present three programmes here, one in Egypt, one in Saudi Arabia and one in Singapore.

My overall intention with the presentation of the above-mentioned programmes and those mentioned below, is to give a brief impression of the differences which exist in these programme across Europe, the Middle East and Asia, which have an impact on how deradicalisation is tackled as well as the difficulties - if not impossibilities of - comparing the programmes.

A different reason for the rather brief character of the presentation is that the scope of the thesis is to detail the what happens on the ground to individuals engaged in an exit programme and how the different actions of the individuals shaped the programme situated in a social-cultural context. This is not the subject of any of the description of the programmes I have come across within the field (Bjørge and Horgan 2009, Horgan 2009, Ashour 2009, Barrett and Bokhari 2009, Abuza 2009, Neumann 2010, Bjørge 2011, Al-Hadlaq 2011, Gunaratna and Hassan 2011, Boucek 2011, 2009, Rubin 2011, Dechesne 2011, El-Said 2012, Schmid 2013, , Riazat and Tuck 2014, Köhler 2014, Ramalingam and Tuck 2014), on which I shall expand in the conclusion.

Islamic groups are defined as sociopolitical movements that base and justify their political principles, ideologies, behaviour and objectives on their understanding of Islam or on their perception of certain past interpretations of Is-

lam. There are many different Islamic groups - both moderates as well as racial and extremist - deradicalisation programmes target the changing of attitudes of individuals who have been involved in once-armed Islamist movements towards their use of violence (Ashour 2009: 4-5).

## Egypt

The Islamic insurgency in Egypt in the 1990's cost the lives of over 1,000 civilians and considerable economic damage. At the height of the crisis and violence, there may have been as many as 30,000 detainees. The insurgency ended in July 1997, when the historic leadership of the Islamic Groups announced a unilateral ceasefire (Rubin 2011:26-29). Yet, in the 1990's, Egypt's largest and most organised violent and extremist group - al-Gama'a al-Islamiya - unilaterally announced a cessation of violence and started a collective process of deradicalisation. In 2007, another extremist and violent group - Jihad al-Islami (IJ) - followed suit. The Egyptian government's initial response to the process, however, was marked by a lack of interest, if not suspicion. After the September 11 attacks in 2001, the government began to help the Islamic Groups' (IG) leadership in promoting the new course. As part of the cessation of violence, the leaders of both groups - each - expressed their revised views in books, in which they set new rules for jihad<sup>56</sup> in a way that delegitimised all forms of terrorism as un-Islamic and restricted holy war to extreme circumstances of self-defence (El-Said 2012).

There are no clear answers as to why and how the leadership of the Islamic groups (IG) decided to renounce violence - apart from perhaps the realisation of the leadership of the lack of success in establishing an Islamic state. Another reason might be the fact that IG experienced a final blow to the different groups after some of its members had committed a gruesome act in Luxor, killing 60 foreign tourists and Egyptians. The attack led to internal division in the movement, and the Luxor massacre caused IG to lose all public support (Rubin 2011:24).

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<sup>56</sup> Jihad has several different meanings. Jihad is an Arabic word often translated as "holy war," but in a purely linguistic sense, the word "jihad" means struggling or striving. The Arabic word for war is: "al-harb". In a religious sense, as described by the Quran and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (s), "jihad" has many meanings. It can refer to internal as well as external efforts to be a good Muslim or believer, as well as working to inform people about the faith of Islam. If military jihad is required to protect the faith against others, it can be performed using anything from legal, diplomatic and economic to political means. If there is no peaceful alternative, Islam also allows the use of force, but there are strict rules of engagement. Innocents - such as women, children, or invalids - must never be harmed, and any peaceful overtures from the enemy must be accepted (<http://islamicsupremecouncil.org/understanding-islam/legal-rulings/5-jihad-a-misunderstood-concept-from-islam.html?start=9>) (28.06.2015)

While there are only tentative explanations of why the Islamic groups ceased to use violence, the report 'DeRadicalising Islamists: Programmes and their Impact in Muslim Majority States' (El-Said 2012) identify a commonality among many of the Islamic militants as important for their recruitment and radicalisation. The commonality is that both their chief ideologists and especially their followers had no formal religious training, and hence many of the members had not been exposed to a plurality of viewpoints. The response to one of the perceived issues or reasons for the individuals to be radicalised was thus to try to expand their understanding of Islam, hence the leaders of the groups were first given simple and then more complex texts to expand the types and sources and thus the interpretations of the Koran (Rubin 20011). The deradicalisation process was not initiated by the state, but the state did come to play a role as it facilitated diverse meetings and dialogue, which developed into strategies promoting deradicalisation by targeting the Islamists' extreme interpretation and understanding of Islam. These moves started a process which made Egypt one of the first countries in the region to apply soft approaches to countering violent extremism by facilitating debate, dialogue and meetings in prison between the leaders of the terror organisations, their members, and other secular and political prisoners. The state also made interaction between people of very different orientations - extremist Islamist and well-reputed Islamic scholars - become possible as the Egyptian government invited credible scholars from Al-Azhar University, one of the most respected institutions of Islamic scholarship in the world, to visit prisons to debate and discuss key issues with the leaders of the violent extremist group. The leaders of IG were also in a different step taken on prison tours to visit their fellows - who were illiterate for the most part - to encourage them in renouncing and denouncing violence in the pursuit of the Islamic cause as at that point, the leaders had been exposed to a different learning and understanding of Islam. A minority of the followers, who did not seem to change their perspective, were moved to different prisons to be unable to influence the others in the course of changing their perspectives.

The Egyptian authorities also used the situation proactively against further Islamist violence and terror as they allowed the leaders to publish their views in newspapers. The dialogues which had taken place inside prison to counter the appeal of jihadism and violent extremism were also given extensive media coverage and exposed to the wider public. Publicly, the leader of the Islamist Groups in line with prominent people in the Egyptian society were allowed by the authorities to verbally attack radical ideologies and extremist groups through articles in daily newspapers and different publications, in which they

de-legitimised violent ideology and the meaning, conditions and ethics of jihad (ibid: 19). Yet, apart from these approaches to deal with the ideological orientation of former terrorist, the state did not do anything else, in spite of the ancient regime of Muhammad Hosni Mubarak supposedly knowing that this population, stigmatised as terrorists, hardened by jail time and facing few employment opportunities in a very competitive labour market presents a risk. The state paid some ex-detainees both as a form of compensation and as a way for the state to monitor their activities (Rubin 2011:33). Yet, people were in general released without further support, which have resulted in a strong critic of the entire approach. Besides, the Egyptian society struggles with enormous issues in general, both before, during the 1990's as well as after the Arab spring, which are contributing factors to a radicalisation process as the government still lacks legitimacy and there is widespread poverty, too, extreme inequality among genders and religious groups - Christian versus Muslims - and widespread corruption, restricted political rights and regular human rights violations (El-Said 2012:20).

## Saudi Arabia

One of the outcomes of the waves of terrorist attacks that struck Saudi Arabia in 2003 and 2004 was the (El-Said 2015: 37) development of an extensive programme directed at the prevention of terrorism and extremism through information - and deradicalisation programmes in prisons, targeting detainees convicted of terror in Saudi Arabia. According to a Saudi Arabian run investigation into prisoners detained for terrorist activities, most *radical* offenders are single young men in their twenties, with previous criminal records for driving and drug offences, coming from large, lower or middle class families with seven to fifteen siblings. 50% of these young men have - according to an evaluation by the Ministry of the Interior of Saudi Arabia - an *inadequate understanding* of Islam, as they did not complete their formal education and/or lack a *proper* religious instruction during their childhood.

The perception is that radicals and terrorists are 'victims of radicalisation' (Al-Hadlaq 2011: 64). They become radicalised because their desire to *be more* religious led them to extremist literature in books, tapes, videos and websites that propagate a radical ideology. According to interviews with Saudi officials, participating scholars have recognised the danger posed to both the faith and the state by what is described as *corrupted understandings* and *misinterpretations of correct doctrine*, and are thus driven to help guide young men back to the correct path (Boucek 2009, 2011:79).

One third of people detained for terrorist activities are perceived to have become radicalised by their travel to hotspots like Afghanistan, Chechnya, Somalia or Iraq, to engage in jihad driven by their perceptions of Muslim grievances and oppression around the world and thus their desire to seek revenge on the Western forces having occupied Muslim lands like Iraq or Afghanistan (ibid: 59-60).

The focus of the Saudi rehabilitation programme is like the Egyptian especially on ideology as the goal is to modify behaviour through informing beliefs. Counsellors guide the radicals through a complex process of religious dialogue, instructions, psychological counselling and extensive social support. The rehabilitation programme subjects the detainees to religious debates and psychological counselling. After detainees are released, constant contact with the released detainees and their families is maintained. Materials like books and audio-visual material propagating moderate Islam are sent to them from time to time. Furthermore, financial and social support continues to be provided to the released detainees in aiding them to reintegrate into society. Released detainees are assisted in going back to school, finding jobs, and potential life partners are introduced to them. By being married, it is hoped that they will keep busy with their domestic responsibilities and appreciate the value of life (Al-Hadlaq 2011, Boucek 2009, 2011).

The Saudi Arabian programme is thus an extensive programme in the sense that it targets ideology in particular, yet also pays attention to the potential significances of social relations and alternative possibilities as means to make the individual change his life course and ideological convictions. The programme also provides some sort of practical logistic support. Graduates are thus helped to secure employment, transportation, funds and a place to live (Horgan and Baddock 2010)

Saudi Arabia thus stresses that the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia etc. and to some extent USA's policy in the region as giving rise to terrorism. Yet, the Saudi Arabian profiling also identifies *radicals* as having an *inadequate understanding of Islam* due to *improper religious instruction* during their childhood. This indeed emphasises the relative nature of radicalisation as a term and the significance of context, when comparing deradicalisation and disengagement programmes around the globe. Yet, of much greater significances is the insubstantial nature of such characteristics as *inadequate* and *proper* as well as the broad nature of the identified profile, being in line with Tore Bjørgo's (2011:278) critics of the experimental profiling of terrorists as too broad to give any results, as mentioned above. Especially when an understanding of the typical profile of *potential* radicals and *how* they become radicalised, as it is

claimed by Abdulrahman Al-Hadlaq, General Director of the Ideological Security Directorate, whose directorate oversees the rehabilitation of terrorist detainees in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2011:61) - has helped the Saudi authorities to correct the misinterpretation of Islam by radicals and to reinforce the *accurate version* of the religion. The identification of people based on such broad and loose characteristics as mentioned above is - if possible - even more problematic - and potentially dangerous - in a state such as the Saudi Kingdom, repudiated for arbitrary detention of - among others - terror suspects in a poorly defined and non-transparent justice system based on religion<sup>57</sup>. The 'war on ideas' in the way the prevention and rehabilitation of terrorists in Saudi Arabia is presented can also be understood as a means for the Kingdom to maintain status quo and can indeed be a potential escalation of radicalisation within the kingdom. This is due to the possibility of different groups possibly engaging in a fight against, what the ones in power in the kingdom postulated to be the *true* version of Islam. To reduce terror activities to a 'war on ideas' also removes any focus on social issues from the matter and reduces Islamism to only concerning a religious question stripped of a potential inherent demand for social reforms and a lack of legitimacy on behalf of the kingdom.

## Singapore

Singapore is a very ethnically diverse society as it is composed of both an Indian, Chinese and Malaysian community. The country is also very religiously diverse as there are 42.5% Buddhists, 15% Muslims, 8.5 % Taoists, 4% Hindus as well as both Protestant and Catholic Christians. Singapore has experienced riots over race and religious matters in the 1950s and 1960s and again in the 1970's and 80s. Hence the Government has taken steps to foster tolerance between the diverse communities. Nonetheless, global and regional development in the 1990's posed a threat to the multi-religious fabric as Al Qaeda and associated groups started propagating to recruit members. In December 2001, the Internal Security Department (ISD) arrested members of the Islamic terror organisation al Jemaah al Islamiyah (JI) and again in 2002, another round of members from al Jemaah al Islamiyah (JI) were arrested (Gunaratna et al. 2011)

The impetus for Singapore's terrorist rehabilitation programme is Singapore's global profile and its affiliation with Western countries such as the US, which has made it a legitimate target among extremists and terrorists in the region (ibid) and thus under a local threat posed by al-Qaeda and al Jemaah al Islami-

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/middle-eastn-africa/saudi-arabia> (28.06.2015)

yah (JI), which are to date two of the most active terrorist groups in South East Asia (ibid).

Especially the Singaporean Muslim community was perceived by the authorities to be under threat of radicalisation by the Islamist ideology as terror groups informed by an extremist interpretation of Islam were active in the region. Therefore, programmes were established in an attempt to reach out to what is described as *vulnerable* segments of the Muslim population (ibid). Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs developed the preventive programme 'Community Engagement Programme' (CEP), for example, as well as a programme targeting the rehabilitation of terrorists in custody. A group called the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) was established - consisting of a group of Muslim clerics - who developed a multifaceted rehabilitation programme. People arrested in relation to terror were interviewed by psychologists in prison, who estimated that the detainees had average intelligence or above. Yet, again they were also estimated either to have a *shallow* conception of Islam or to having been *misguided* as a group, the psychologists concluded. Many of the people involved had studied Islam in the search for religious knowledge - it was concluded - but had also become attached to radical groups because of the sense of Muslim fraternity and companionship involved (ibid 38).

As part of its programmes to engage the Muslim community, the Singaporean government approached key Muslim leaders, and known Muslim scholars were also asked for their opinions on the kind of thinking and ideology propounded by the detainees. They concluded, as in the Egyptian and Saudi Arabian cases, that the detainees had *deviated* from mainstream Islam and that all detainees have a *distorted* conception of the ideology pertaining to Islam as they promote violence as a way of achieving their aims. Their paradigm was again described as too simplistic and that everything that their perceptions revolved around was hatred and anger and exclusiveness to their cause. The detainees were described as having: 1. a distorted ideology 2. promoted violence as a means 3. a simplistic paradigm 4. hatred and anger 5. an exclusive agenda vis-a-vis other groups.

The programmes promoted by the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) approaching the terrorist offenders were also to provide assistance in rehabilitating the detainees' family members as they were receiving religious counselling as part of the programme. The people in charge of the programme obtained new skills as clerics, e.g. were given counselling courses, and some received certificates in Islamic journalism and creative writing. Many attended academic talks on misconstrued ideology and consulted with both Singaporean and foreign specialists (ibid: 39 - 40).



The core of the counter-ideology content was the publication of 'Manual for Religious Counselling', RRG newsletters for its members, articles to the mass media and booklets and brochures for the general public on the dangers of deviant ideology. The trained clerics conducted training courses for the religious counsellors on the rehabilitation manual and guidelines for counselling. The manuals developed in this context are intended as important tools and guides for religious counsellors to conduct structured sessions about the themes: understanding realities and exploring behaviour. There are also step-by-step guidelines listed to facilitate and assist the religious counsellors in the discussion, who were encouraged to complement their usage of the manual with reference to the Koran and Hadith of the Prophet, linkages to the continuous historical legacy of Islam and especially in the times of the Guided Caliphate, the Abbasids and the Umayyads period - which is perceived as the Golden Age of Islam. The implications of - what people with authority in Singapore perceive as misconstrued ideology and mentality - and what that does to mankind and religion were also made apparent. Because of its foundation on an agreed vision or norm for the correct interpretation of Islam, the counselling enabled the trained clerics to ascertain that the detainees were misled by their leaders in their search and pursuit of spiritual renewal, guidance and true leadership and godly rewards and sanctions. Therefore, both the detainees and their families are expected to follow sessions to be able to identify the differences between the ideology promoted by Islamic groups and the one promoted by officially acknowledged clerics (Gunaratna and Hassan 2011: 36-58).

Having presented some of the information available about the programme, it emerges that the description of the programme thus provides details especially about the positions of the people involved and their approaches to the detainees. Yet, the descriptions of what the programmes does for the people being the target of the programmes are completely lacking as their perspective on the matter is again omitted.

The above-mentioned programmes contain a substantive element of religious and ideological re-education. This is no surprise as both the Singaporean and the Saudi programme, which emerged in 2004, initially adopted Yemen's strong emphasis on religious 're-education', with prisoners having to attend courses in which contentious religious concepts are discussed. The Singaporean Religious Rehabilitation Group is also led by religious clerics and understands religious re-education to be its core mission. The programmes are thus building upon inspiration from other programmes in what can be defined as a mainly Muslim world. All the three above-mentioned programmes are based

on the notion of terrorists as ‘victims’, whose religious ideas are based on misinformation and a lack of proper knowledge about Islam, creating the notion that re-education and reform are both necessary and possible. The programme in Yemen which ran from 2002-05 consisted of a series of religious dialogues between prisoners and religious clerics, which aimed at convincing the prisoners that their justification for taking up violent ‘jihad’ had no basis in scripture (Neumann 2010).

## Can one programme learn from the next? The consequence of social and cultural-historical differences involved in diverse programmes

What kinds of incentives and instruments are deployed in deradicalisation and disengagement programmes and in what combination? Who leads the programmes and how? How do programmes ensure that individuals’ disengagement and/or deradicalisation are sustained? And how are the programmes addressed – and conditioned – by the wider environment in which they are implemented? To search for answers to these questions also provides an understanding of the challenges involved in assessing the effectiveness of deradicalisation programmes - which is of great concern (Horgan and Burdstock 2010, Neumann 2010).

First of all, the programmes’ different ontologies have an impact on what they emphasise, implement and how various measures are combined. This is in itself of great importance, emphasising the extent to which disengagement and deradicalisation programmes do not occur in a cultural, social, historical and political vacuum. Consequently, the circumstances under which they take place will have a pivotal effect on the content of the programmes, who they aim, and the cultural - historical and social frame will condition what is pointed out as potential approaches to support the individual in entering a different life course.

There are certain universal issues involved like the very basic notion that each programme is created as a response to terror activities, with the aim of preventing at least people already involved from carrying out future terrorist activities, by supporting them in changing their lives. The core of the psychological and social process that the individual in a disengagement process is going through seems in essence to be universal (Barrelle 2014, Bjørge 2009). Yet, the individual expression of the process or the personal crisis involved and

thus the answers to it will - due to historical, cultural and social differences - have particular traits and manifestations. Obvious questions intrude, what can be compared in the programmes? And why try to do so, as it is my intention in this section.

By comparing the above-mentioned programmes, differences will emerge, which are in themselves informative as they draw our attention to the extent to which the issues being targeted in the programmes tell us about what the problem is perceived to be. The issues the individuals in the programmes have been struggling against, and thus the experience they have, likewise point out the actions deemed necessary in order to support them in leaving an extremist and terrorist group at a societal, collective and individual level. To exemplify the very different contexts of the programmes, I wish first to draw attention to the programmes targeting Islamists and their initial differences, compared to the European ones.

First and foremost, the individuals in the programmes in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia have often been involved in warfare in Algeria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya and elsewhere or/and have been part of active terrorist groups fighting against what is perceived as Western aggression on Islamic soil as well as other issues, as mentioned above. This scenario differs greatly from a European one, as extreme right-wingers have not been involved in war on a collective basis, but is mainly involved in a struggle mainly linked to national issues. Their experiences are thus linked to fights in demonstrations, and extremely few of the individuals in EXIT programmes have experience getting anywhere near war-like experiences or direct terror activities. This is due to the agenda of most extremist right-wingers and their active work to overthrow democratic systems through potentially violent means and harassment of people, as mentioned above.

The outcome of the differences in context the programmes targeting Islamists are mainly approaching individuals at a collective level, but in recent years, the approaches have to an increasing extent also aimed at the individual level. Zooming in closer, it becomes evident why, even if we can assess successful approaches in each programme, what is deemed effective in one programme may not be of any use in a different setting. Even the perception of the most central unit in the programme - the individual - is completely at odds with one another across programmes in Europe on the one hand and the Middle East, North Africa and Asia on the other.

The understanding of the individual is an outcome of how our 'worlds' emerge through social interaction adding significance to certain elements over others, which in turn disappears from collective awareness.

The different perception of the individual also reveals to some extent what can be expected from the person. The individual in all the mentioned Western programmes is positioned as a person who is expected to be a voluntary, motivated and responsible participant in a self-help programme. Thus, the individual is conceptualised as an equal partner and not as a victim of misguidance, as he is perceived in the programmes targeting Islamists. Hereby the responsibility for his own action and thus his agency is to some extent taken away from him. So is his basis for evaluation, which is questioned as it supposedly must be regarded as less trustworthy than somebody who is not perceived to suffer from misconception and misguidance, for example the religious cleric representing the *true* version of Islam.

The starting point thus carries in it an inequality, of which EXIT Sweden and the other European programmes cannot be accused - in spite of EXIT Sweden's naming of the individuals in their programmes as *clients*, a notion I shall expand on in the articles. The very different settings - the programmes targeting Islamists take place in a detention<sup>58</sup> centre and the other in an NGO, also manifest a huge difference - along with the perception of the individual and his experience.

All in all a closer focus on the issue the programmes are addressing respectively reveals dramatic differences and consequences in relation to the context and the character of the problem as well as the legitimacy on behalf of the programmes.

Moving one step closer to the contextual frame of right-wing extremist who are the target group in programmes in Germany and Sweden, differences also appear, as mentioned above. The countries represent very different historical contexts and some differences in relation to constitutional rights, which have an impact on what kind of actions will be regarded as extreme. The outcome is that EXIT Germany recognizes as a threat to democratic and pluralist culture when people promote an ideology that inherently denies people equal rights. This is perceived as an expression of a radicalisation process that needs to be interrupted by various, individually tailored methods - even if their actions are non-violent (Köhler 2015:124).

At the same time, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Germany acknowledge that marginalisation, a sense of belonging and participation are important elements in individuals' entrance and retention in extremist groups. The Norwegian project, the Swedish EXIT, EXIT Germany and the Danish EXIT share many similarities as they were all established based on the approaches in the

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<sup>58</sup> It is not clear either if the people detained are convicted of a crime or not, which makes the question of lawfulness and legitimacy even more urgent

Norwegian project. One key issue in their shared approach is that it targets the individual, who based on his/her own volition contacts the organisations, whereupon the staff assess the potential client's motivation and personal situation. At the same time, both EXIT Sweden and Germany also work to promote an agenda of inclusion and tolerance by participation in public debates, seminars and workshops.

Another common trait is the focus on the general life situation of the clients. The programmes' approaches to the individual's ideological conviction differ in that EXIT Germany prioritises altering the ideology and extremist attitudes of the person by working directly with his/her ideological perception, contrary to the Swedish EXIT programme. This is probably an outcome of Germany's particularity as the historical settings for the National Socialist ideology and political party as well as the fact that several of EXIT Germany's clients are 4th generation Nazi. This historical frame thus makes certain cultural-historical specific openings to the neo-Nazi scene, as the ideological conviction might stem from family setting and lifestyle, which potentially makes the ideology central for joining Nazi organisations. This appears to some extent different from the situation in Sweden and elsewhere.

The Swedish approach to the ideological issues is that the individual will eventually change his or her perception by participation in alternative social settings and dialogue, implicitly attacking the totalitarian ideology - how this is done will be the subject of articles 3, 4, 5, and 6. These different approaches thus reflect the diverse ways in which individuals get involved in and introduced to Nazism and extremist right-wing ideologies in Sweden, Norway and Germany.

The strengths of two of the above-mentioned programmes - Germany and Sweden - are also that they are run by NGOs that can adopt a holistic approach to the individuals and that are not associated with neither the police, the secret services nor directly influenced by a political agenda nor dependent on the legitimacy of the government or authorities. This is not the case for either Norway or Denmark, where both the police and the secret service are involved in the exit programmes - apart from Fryshuset Denmark - as well as the programmes in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia, as they are all run by the authorities.

The benefit of the Swedish and Germany NGO's model derives also from the base of shared experience between staff and clients, as there are former neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists involved in both organisations. The staff may also possess more legitimacy towards the individual in the programmes than a social worker might. Also, it must obviously be easier to trust a mentor who

has been in the same situation than somebody who works for the government and an intelligence agency - the former enemy (Björge 2009: 151).

I wish to emphasise the strengths of EXIT Sweden's practice of establishing a coach/client relation and their approach to personal development as an outcome of interaction and participation in different activities. The joint activities give the coach a possibility of pointing out signs of significance for the client, which creates the potential for the client of coping in new settings and entering different worlds than the extremist right wing - which I shall debate in detail in the articles, and, to some extent, below. The programmes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Singapore also use individuals - family members and/or clerics as interlocutors - but apparently not in the same way as is the case in Sweden, since the programmes are linked to detention centres and prisons.

The commonalities between the South East Asian, Middle Eastern and European programmes are for example employing go-betweens, be they religious scholars or repentant terrorists who are supposed to be better able to exert an influence on the potential exiter than the authorities themselves. The emphasis on ideology in Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Germany revolves around theology and ideology, whereas in, Norway and Sweden, in contrast, exit interventions focus less, and sometimes not at all, on ideology and the influence attempt tends to be more indirect (*ibid*).

One of the most contentious debates in relation to (de)radicalisation and disengagement is about the role of ideology in the process that leads to violent extremism as well as in the after-care of former extremists and terrorists. To what extent is ideology important and how to handle ideology in exit programmes? These questions are the subject of the final paragraphs in this preface to the articles and the summary and conclusion.

## Deradicalisation - ideology, social needs or embodied knowledge - what to target?

Does ideology matter? Or has its role and significance been overrated at the expense of more important factors, such as group relations and/or grievance (Neumann in 2010)? For example Neumann does consider the debate between cognitive versus behavioural radicalisation to be extraneous and potentially counter-productive. Therefor he call for research to consider the "complex nexus between belief and behaviour as a whole"(Neumann 2013: 889 in Barrelle 2014). It is important to mention that Neumann also asserts that no

one disputes the importance of factors other than ideology in the process of radicalisation (2013:892).

The considerations are important as the answers have an impact on exit programmes and the different approaches in them, as to ascertain what the goal of the programmes ought to be. Should the main emphasis be placed on political beliefs vis-à-vis group dynamics, social networks, grievances, personal crises and other influences in each case? Or are there other important factors to take into consideration in relation to this debate amplifying Neumann's argument of perceiving belief and behaviour as a whole?

The issues are crucial in relation to disengagement and especially deradicalisation programmes as well as in the current research on these issues, which is also discussed by a range of scholars (Neumann 2010, 2013, Köhler 2014, Gunaratna and Rubin 2011, Dechesne 2011, Dalsgaard-Nielsen 2013).

The overwhelming majority of programmes seek to address deradicalisation - the systematic moderation of radical thoughts (Dechesne 2011:289) - and thus add great significance to the individuals' ideological orientation. The preconceived knowledge in the majority of exit-programmes thus focuses on ideology as the main driving force for the individuals' actions and orientation and thereby points out what the individual needs support to alter.

Ideology is being described as a political narrative (Berntzen and Sandberg 2014), an idealised interpretation (Köhler 2014), whole-of-life philosophies that "impose a pattern, structure and interpretation on how we read (or mis-read) political facts, events, occurrences and actions" (Freedon, 2003:2-4 in Barrelle 2014: 164) or as I defined above a;

'systems of ideas that tell people how the social world is (supposed to be) functioning, what their place in it is, and what is expected of them. Ideologies are patterns of beliefs and expressions that people use to interpret and evaluate the world in a way designed to shape, mobilise, direct, organise and justify certain modes and courses of action.' (Schmid 2013: 9).

Ideology defined in this way relates mainly to a level of ideas and discourse - patterns of belief and expressions - and is perceived to inform individuals' modes and course of action - just like ideology, such defined, is the frame through which the individual comes to understand and interpret the world and his/her place in it.

Disengagement and deradicalisation programmes are often separated into two categories, of which one is mainly targeting deradicalisation - focusing mainly on the ideological aspect of engagement in an extremist group - as for example programmes in Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Indonesia as well as EX-

IT Germany. The second category is mainly giving significance to social support aimed at reintegration of the person in society. Exit programmes in the Scandinavian countries and explicitly EXIT Sweden are given as an example of programmes only seeking to influence the behaviour of the individuals in it and as not addressing their ideological orientation (Dechesne 2011:290) - a point which the present discussion and the articles (3,4,5 and 6) show is an incorrect assessment.

A focus on ideology and thus deradicalisation might again reflect the perception of people's way into these movements. For example as mentioned above some of the issues EXIT Germany is handling; fourth generation Nazis, which pushes the ideological orientation to the forefront as potentially the initial reason for participation in the movement.

People's way into the movement might create an additional focus on the cognitive and ideological aspect, if people are perceived mainly to participate as outcomes of their ideological orientation. Indeed, without reference to beliefs, none of the behaviours adopted by participants in extremist groups make any sense (Neumann 2013:880). Yet, the importance of ideology at the potential expense of other factors such as group mechanisms should be treated with caution, as most participants in social movement or extremist groups are not:

'intellectuals who have spent months studying their movement's texts; but they often have a good sense of, and commitment to, core principles and ideas, and they are motivated by the group's analysis—however simplistically expressed—of what is wrong with society, who is to blame, and what needs to be done to fix it' (ibid: 882).

Ideology is part of becoming an extremist or terrorist, hence it seems reasonable for deradicalisation to be at the core of many exit interventions. Yet, it remains questionable if dialogues and talks will support an individual in deradicalising.

While acknowledging the interplay between the social, emotional and ideological aspects of identity and commitment, Barrelle (2014:164) writes:

'in the context of disengagement, there is a corresponding shift away from the radical ideology that is typically accompanied by a large set of social, personal, identity, and behavioural changes'.

The question is, if the disengagement and the deradicalisation happen in reality in a corresponding way? The approach implicitly makes the cognitive overrule the behavioural and bodily dispositions. The link between cognition and action is the core of the matter in preventing terrorist attacks and extremist



ideas developing into violent actions. Bjørge's and Horgan's (2009) finding as well as the present study illustrate that to focus too narrowly on ideology as the major driver for a person's action overlooks the diverse conditions, which also influence extremists or terrorists. Their actions seem to be (re)actions on behalf of a whole range of conditions, and therefore they are not only struggling with the ideological convention, when they either leave a group or are becoming involved in a disengagement and deradicalisation programme, because of detention or imprisonment – on which I shall expand below.

Kate Barrelle quotes a former member of the Greek left-wing extremist group '17 November' to illustrate her point, of the relation between disillusionments with the ideology and people's disengagement, which as mentioned above, she claims most likely is followed by a corresponding shift in social, personal, identity, and behavior. The Greek left-winger is quoted for saying; "guns need hands, but they also need ideas. If the ideas are not there, the guns won't work" (Kassimeris 2011:569 in Barrel 2014:166). That might be so, that 'guns need ideas', but guns likewise need hands, and hands embody experiences and competencies. Pointing to my argument, that to support an individual to deradicalise, the approaches ought also to address - at the same time - human actions as outcome of *both* embodied and cognitive dispositions. This is so because both parts influence human actions - sometimes in ways we do not anticipate or find desirable - based on a variety of reasons. These considerations are important in relation to the discussions about the importance of targeting ideology vis à vis of social needs and I wish to add, social practices as promoters of deradicalisation and disengagement in exit programmes.

Acknowledging that deradicalisation is indeed important in exit-programmes, there simultaneously seem to be indicators contesting the significance of ideology. One reason is that, even though the programmes based on religious dialogue have succeeded in supporting people to deradicalise, as for example the Saudi Arabian programme, several have also been criticised for recidivism. For example both Yemen and Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been accused of recidivism of between 10 to 40%. Some of the people who have gone through the Saudi Arabian programme have supposedly fled to Yemen and rejoined al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula cells (Schmid 2013:43). This may be an outcome of a variety of reasons, but it may also be because these programmes place an overwhelming emphasis on ideology and thus cognition, hence dialogue is used as the tool to make individuals disengage and thus deradicalise.

Daniel Köhler (2014), who is a former employee at EXIT Germany and scholar, argues for a strong focus on deradicalisation through the use of counter-narratives, as he argues:

‘The dismantling of the radical ideology *responsible for a possible previous criminal behaviour or a high risk thereof* becomes the *cornerstone* (my italics) and definitional criteria for de-radicalization. Practically this might include intense theological debate as part of the Middle Eastern state run de-radicalization programmes in prisons. Some Western, non-governmental programmes include the dismantling of radical ideology and encourage among other tools for example guided, critical self-reflection through problem centred interviews, victim-perpetrator dialogue, art projects, social work and prevention assistance. While it might seem practically easier to tackle a radical religious ideology like Jihadism due to the possible utilization of religious authorities and jointly accepted foundations (e.g. the Quran), other ideologies such as neo-Nazism might involve many different practical problems’ (2014:131).

Köhler thus argues that dismantling the radical ideology is crucial, as he places it as the reason for criminal behaviour or high risks of it (2014:124) and thus establishes an almost direct link between radical ideology and a criminal behaviour. Therefore, the dismantling of the ideology is, in his perspective, the cornerstone of deradicalisation, in order to make the individual change his/her perception. Inevitably, which he implies, it will make him/her change his/her behaviour and actions in line with Barrell’s argument - even though he also points to neo-Nazism involving different practical problems. Köhler also emphasises that, in accordance with the international debate, he argues that a high level of radicalisation does not equal a high level of violent behaviour (2014). The link between ideological orientation and thus actions - informed by the ideological orientation - seems unfortunately to be very complex as Schmid (2013:29) remarks, quoting Horgan and Bjørgo (2009);

‘one is inclined to think that de-radicalisation comes first and disengagement – behavioural distancing from the violent terrorist *modus operandi* – comes afterwards, this is not necessarily so. John Horgan and Tore Bjørgo have argued convincingly that ‘there is no clear evidence to suggest that disengagement from terrorism may bring with it de-radicalisation, nor (and perhaps more controversially) is there clear evidence to support the argument that de-radicalisation is a necessary accompaniment to disengagement.’

Adding to this complexity, Bjørgo and Horgan (2009:3) also point out that:

‘when individuals leave terrorist or extremist groups and behaviors, some individuals are stripped of their radical views as a *consequence* of having left the group rather than that being a cause for leaving. Thus, people often re-adjust their values system in order to make it in accordance with their new patterns of behaviour’ (Horgan and Bjørgo:2009:3).

This seems odd at first - if our point of departure is that people are mainly informed by ideology, but as the present study indicates, there are good reasons for this turn, as I shall argue in the articles, yet beginning below.

There are several strong arguments against adding too strong a focus on the individuals' ideological orientation in exit programmes. Ideology gives us good reason to explain extremist orientations and to some extent the individuals' action. Yet, a strong focus on ideology may come to overshadow the other reasons for the individuals' participation in an extremist group. Of greater importance is that ideology seems not to be the main issues the individual is struggling with in a process of disengagement and deradicalisation.

I also wish to argue that ideology is comparable to the concept of culture, which is never containing enough details or rules as to inform the agent of what to do or not, when and how (Bourdieu 1974). Therefore it might be worth to reconsider if humans' actions can be approach as sort of rather direct outcome of ideologies as they do not include context-sensitive rules (Holland et al. 1998:13).

Yet, what I especially wish to add focus to is social movement or political groups - extreme or not - as communities of practice evolving round ideology. The individuals in those communities improvise and develop their strategies on a daily basis, both as actions for, but also as reactions to other political groups and individuals in cultural-historical times. It thus seems reasonable to conclude that individuals are not only acting as a response to the ideology orientation while being part of groups, but are simultaneously acting and react to a constant flux of incidences. This might reinforce his/her ideological orientation, but the individual does likewise develop competences and skills through the different required improvised actions.

Humans are also, as Holland et al. (1998) point out, both blessed and cursed by their dialogic nature—their tendency to encompass a number of views in virtual simultaneity and tension, regardless of their logical compatibility. This observation again draws attention to how individuals in extreme groups are also moving between different feelings of doubts about the cause and the movements' potential success. As well as it must be suspected - a whole set of other emotions linked to diverse activities, potential position and status or loss of it, other significant persons, etc.

If the individuals' way into a movement, as well as the activity and daily life as a group member is the outcome - as it is perceived in EXIT Sweden, Norway and supposedly the Aarhus model - for a myriad of reasons, then it seems natural to act according to a perspective, in which the ideological radicalisation is mainly happening after they have joined the group (Aly 2012). In this case,

ideological factors seem again likely not to be the main or only issues to be dealt with in an exit-programme, either, if the goal is to reintegrate the individual as a non-extremist or criminal into society.

These arguments are accentuated because of the fact according to Hogan (2009:8) that an individual changes while engaged, as an outcome of repeated social and psychological interactions with an ideology and the community of practice it engenders and, I wish to add, because of the embodied knowledge acquired by the individuals along the way. This aspect is essential because ideologies are like figured worlds, since for figured worlds or ideology to become part of the individual's personal knowledge and identity, action is required. The individual supposedly comes to identify with the ideology through actions and interaction with others<sup>59</sup> in an ideology-oriented group acting in cultural-historical times. In that process, signs - material as well as immaterial - of significance will be pointed out to him or her, which causes the individual to establish a certain frame of interpretation and understanding - the ideology/figured world. For an individual to be in a situation, in which new signs of significance are pointed out, he/she is participating in a different situation than usual, in the same way. Informed by an alternative horizon of meaning, the individual is required to improvise new actions and reaction as part of the groups, which over time create dispositions and an altered subjectivity (Holland et al. 1998, Vygotsky 1987). This means that the individual develops certain ways of *acting*, as the individual improvises yet informed by a different cultural and social base, which is the group and the activities it brings about as responses to a wider societal context.

The participation positions the person in relation to the wider society (Karpantschof 2007, Christensen 2009) and makes the individual develop daily routines, new ways of acting and alternative sorts of sentiments and sensitivities (Holland 1998, 2010). Over time, this becomes embodied knowledge if the individual continues, giving the person a sense of who he or she is as a group member along the way as well as new competences and dispositions. In this way, both 'the hands' and 'the ideas' become important 'in handling the gun', from Kate Barrelle's example above, and this thus explains why it is crucial in a deradicalisation process to handle the embodied knowledge. This

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<sup>59</sup> This being said, I am aware that an argument could be, what about the 'lone wolf' potentially getting radicalised through the internet, meaning are we interacting while on the net? The example given by Lars Erik Berntzen & Sveinung Sandberg (2014) and others (Hervik and Meret 2013, Bjørge 2012) places Anders Behring Breivik's action and perception as informed by others, who thought their writings, sayings, films and movies have made Breivik develop certain frames of interpretations and understandings of questions related to the immigration and 'threats' as he perceived it, inherent in a multicultural society.

might explain, as mentioned by several informants in this study, their difficulties of not relapsing into - not old conventions - but old behaviours – which, it could be argued, would potentially gain attention and invitations from active extremists or criminals, thus restarting a former engagement and thus causing recidivism.

By analysing the empirical findings through the prism of practice theory and the cultural-historical school of psychology I have become aware of how participation and (joint) actions prompt movements, feelings, experiences, social interaction, which are the means by which figured worlds become personal. This, I am convinced, is crucial knowledge to act upon in disengagement and deradicalisation programmes.

The articles in the thesis thus emphasise that one thing is to be ideologically oriented, yet a wholly different thing is for the individual to become aware of the extent to which he/she has come to embody a certain knowledge and routines, as part of the identity formation which has taken place as outcomes of his or her *participation* in an extremist group - and which exit programmes ought to focus on. Through immersion in the everyday practice in a symbolic world, people – right-wing extremist or not - form bodily and mental dispositions relevant to it. Therefore, participation and social interaction in alternative social settings - like Fryshuset or when training with a coach or other joint activities - are what support the individual in *transforming* not only his base of reflection (the ideology), but also helps the individual *become aware of his or her embodied knowledge*, which, when becoming reflective, is easier to act upon and handle or outright control for the individual seeking a different life -and thus to develop an alternative identity. This is why I argue participation and interaction are essential in supporting a person in altering their self-understanding and identity, which is absolutely crucial for us becoming different visions of whom and how we are. The importance of handling embodied knowledge is in my view what is crucial for - as Köhler (2014) writes - the dismantling of the radical ideology. Yet, his further argument making the radical ideology responsible for a possible previous criminal behaviour or a high risk thereof, which is the reason why, in his view deradicalisation is the cornerstone and definitional criteria for an exit programme, is what I opposed. In my perspective, the path to deradicalisation does not pass only through dialogue and talks.

The reason is that we improvise, based on *sediment* of past histories, which have *settled* in us (Holland et al. 1998). That ways of acting *settled in us* or what Bourdieu calls habitus - point to the routinised and embodied aspect of people's actions, of which we are only to certain extents fully aware and therefore

do not only act and react based on rational, calculated estimations of the next actions alone. Vygotsky argues in a different, yet similar line, that:

‘By adapting the mediational means and the modes of organization involved in carrying out certain actions on a social or ‘intermental’ plane and using them to mediate activity, the individual develops not only new means of carrying out specific actions but qualitatively new kinds of mental functions. Significantly, these mental functions were seen as developing not merely through the individual’s experience in social interaction but through the transformation of social behavior from the intermental to the intramental plane’ (Norris Minick 1987:22)

Hereby making behaviour and consciousness one, which seems very important to emphasise in this respect as it is exactly why it is so hard for dialogues alone to support people in becoming aware of - at least to some extent - their entire perceptions and embodied knowledge. It does not help them either to develop - which is of all-importance - alternative paths of actions and thereby alternative sentiments and sensitivities or emotions. These are the conditions which especially seem to support people in creating new lives as they develop new connections in the brain - which EXIT Sweden argues - is important in a disengagement and deradicalisation process. Those aspects are also discussed in much detail, especially in the last article ‘The continuous struggle of becoming... somebody – Former right-wing extremists’ continued process of self-transformation and social repositioning after an exit programme’.

Dialogues targeting religious and ideological conviction are important, yet such dialogue cannot to the same extent as activities in an alternative setting help make the individual or client become aware of taken-for-granted-truths and embodied knowledge to the same extent as can activities. Activities are less predictable and - this is the clue - demands that the individual improvises entirely new ways of acting, as he or she is positioned in a different figured world, than that of the extremist groups. The client will by the mere fact of being involved in EXIT suddenly be in new situations, necessitating other ways of interaction than the individual has so far been familiar with - which the articles 3, 4, 5 and 6 give detailed information about. To master social situations, in EXIT’s view, requires social skills, meaning competencies which can be learned by anybody, provided that somebody *demonstrates* how to do it. A point which again emphasises how social interaction is as much part of engagement in extremist groups as it is in a disengagement and deradicalisation process. Coaches at EXIT involve clients in different activities, such as visits to museums, weight-lifting, walking and talking, informal café meetings and

paintball. The strategy is very informative about EXIT Sweden's perceptions, as it reflects EXIT's approach to personal change.

Their approach is based on the conviction that engaging in a variety of activities repeatedly gives individuals a wide range of experiences and emotions that create new connections in the brain, which, according to an employee, is a precondition for people to be able to start (re)acting in new ways. A statement which seems indeed in line with Vygostky's approach and which seizes what Köhler points out to be a major challenge for deradicalisation programmes:

‘the complex practical and psychological effect of role residuals – elements of the former ideology or role still influential on the individual's life’(2014:126).

The reason why focusing too extensively on ideology in exit programmes can be seen as problematic as we get informed by the figured worlds we *act* in, in unpredictable ways, which is also apparent in the quote from Köhler. We improvise while we act and to a large extent our actions seem not to be direct outcomes of reflective decisions, but rather from sediment from past experiences, which have settled in us. The unpredictable link between ideological orientation, radicalisation and violent actions is also accentuated by the complex relation between ideology and actions (Horgan and Bjørge 2009). Some people change their ideological conviction as a result of having left and not as a reason for it, thus adapting their behaviour to an alternative orientation which they develop afterwards (Bjørge 2009).

The examples mentioned signify just how difficult the link between ideology and behaviour is, to focus too one-sidedly on ideology, exactly the part which can be promoted through dialogue leaves the other part - the embodied knowledge - potentially unaffected.

This study will, especially in article 5 ‘Adding a Grey Tone to a Black and White World View – How Role Models and Social Encouragement can lead Former Right Wing Extremists to transform their Identity’ argue that the embodied knowledge, which the individual develops through participation in an extremist group - potentially entailing criminal competence - needs to become conscious knowledge for the individual. Otherwise he or she might drop out of one group, only to move on to a different criminal group because it resonated culturally and socially and provides a possibility for the individual to use his/her acquired skills and competences.

The jumping from one group to a different one has to do with the personality development people experience within such organisations, I argue along with Mørcke, Bovenkerk 2011, Horgan and Braddock 2010. Horgan and Braddock's (2010) study, for example, displays how the Northern Irish Early Release

Scheme was consistently criticised for releasing terrorist offenders. It was found that nearly 17% of gang members captured between 2006 and 2007 were formerly demobilised combatants. Neo-Nazis - like other participants in organised extremist, terrorist or/and criminal groups and gangs - tend also to border jump between right-wing extremist groups and Hells Angels or alternative groups and gangs. Yet, some groups appear not to be an alternative like a radical Islamic group might be too different in terms of practice and cultural norms to be a realistic alternative for a (former) neo-Nazi, which might not be the case for a former gang member.

Individuals thus tend to stay within the scene, as it forms their main social network as well as it has shaped their perception of the world, embodied knowledge and social practice. This directs our attention to that though individuals may give up on one group; they might jump on to the next one provided that their embodied knowledge, social skills and competences are not altered in a joint effort with the motivated individual to avoid a continued jumping within a criminal scene (Mørck 2015).

This is also the reason why EXIT Sweden's approach seems to add strong arguments for an exit model which does not operate with a separated focus on either social need or deradicalisation (to a large extent), but rather introduces a third way. That of approaching the individual or client's identity involving both parts and the embodied knowledge at the same time, based on the perception that people become through actions and activities. Why this is so important is because that model, by approaching the individual through activities, the person develops new skills and embodied knowledge along the way. This I am convinced is what supports the individual in becoming aware of him/her self in new and alternative ways than hitherto and especially helps the individual put a halt to the bodily competences, unreflective routines or embodied knowledge. These are what create a habitus potentially making the individual move on to a different criminal group - in order to know the game and feel within his or her zone of comfort. (To disengage and deradicalise are in all aspects demanding, challenging and difficult).

Let me give one concrete example from this study - and there are many others to be presented in the articles - which is showing how people through participation become aware of themselves in different and unexpected ways through actions. The participation in activities makes the individual develop alternative feelings towards themselves and others, which is part of getting other experiences and thus new horizons in which to think. This is what makes them develop different bodily knowledge and skills, which are all the ingredients re-



quired in order to become...somebody else. The narrator is a young female, having been heavily involved in the extremist right for several years, she says: *'The ideology didn't disappear for me till I actually left the group. Precisely at the beginning and for a long time, I thought there was nothing wrong with the ideology but that it was the people who were in these environments who had a problem. But then the longer I was working... and especially bearing in mind that I was just HERE to work (we are sitting in Fryshuset) and here there's an incredible amount of people with different ethnicities and different styles of clothes, it was like it wasn't possible to stick to it, while I got to know people. That is, I knew people with different ethnicities and different sexual tendencies and worked with them and I had to respect them for their professional knowledge and as people and I kind of got to know them and talked to them. It wasn't possible in any way to feel that I ought to be superior to them because of the colour of my skin for example, because many of them were superior to me in knowledge, so it (the ideology) disappeared more and more. And I think actually because I was lucky to be exposed to other people and other ethnicities who work here and who had knowledge, skills, education and life experience that often resembled my own so that you could meet them halfway. It would have been damned hard for me to get beyond the ideological idea, if I hadn't been here and if I hadn't just had these people around me, it's really important, because I cannot go out in the city and just stop the first guy I see and say 'Hey, let's get to know each other.' It wouldn't come naturally to me. But just meeting others was extremely important because, if it hadn't been like that, since the majority of my friends are still of Swedish origin and then it would have been easy, even though I wouldn't show it publicly, to stick to the conviction, making me some kind of closet Nazi'.* (Interview transcript 2012)

As Kristine points out in the quote, she did not question her ideology, but rather the people in the extremist group, till she had worked with - meaning engaged in Fryshuset as a community of practices. The people she was interacting with consisted of - in multiple ways - different people - whom she got to know and talk to - which is crucial, as this is what makes her become aware of her own perceptions. She discovers that they are simply more skilled than her - irrespective of the fact, perceived through Kristin's ideology, of being - in her perspective - non-whites. Kristine emphasises the importance for her of, as she says, being exposed to what constitutes for her 'other people and other ethnicities' with different skills, education and life experiences - which to some extent resemble her, and at the same time are very different from her. These experiences in Fryshuset, interaction with other people, are what make her become aware of her own ideological idea and the effect it had on her and the, as she points out, 'extreme importance' of meeting others. Such meetings and interaction push Kristin to improvise in alternative ways informed by a different figured world than that of the extremist right, which in new ways

makes her question her ideological orientation and makes her become aware of it. Without this sort of interaction linked to work in a given social setting - combined with dialogue with her coach - she had potentially not become aware of her own perception. She comes to evaluate against a situation in which she, despite her skin color - is the least skillful, which is one out of many situations, what makes her move forward in becoming aware, developing different skills and gaining new experience leading to alternative and new conclusions about herself and her surroundings.

Finally, I wish to quote one of Anja Dalsgaard-Nielsen's (2013) many arguments against deradicalisation programmes mainly based on dialogues.

Dalsgaard-Nielsen points out that it;

'follows from dissonance and reactance theory that, unless an external influence agent hits on a spot, where the potential exiter is doubting or wavering, chances are that even the most well-argued, logical and cogent message, will be counter-argued and rejected. If this happens, simply adding logical and/or theological strength to the arguments against for example militant Islamism's interpretation of Islam or extreme right-wing notions about racial differences does not appear to be a formula for success. Instead of seeking to overpower the cognitive defences of a potential exiter, one might instead seek to circumnavigate them. Research into persuasion has for a long time pointed to for example timing and match between agent and target of intervention as important factors, and newer research has begun to explore additional means of reducing resistance. Robert Cialdini and other researchers have pointed out that affinity between the agent and the target of intervention, for example common friends, background or interests, generally promotes liking, and liking enhances the ability of the agent of intervention to get through to the target. If the agent of intervention enjoys authority within a relevant field of knowledge, high social standing within a relevant social group or is seen to represent a number of values shared by the target of intervention, influence chances are enhanced. It has also been demonstrated that influence attempts stand a better chance if the target is fatigued, experiencing a personal crisis, dislocated due to a geographical move or a major change in life circumstances. Thus, the timing of an influence attempt to coincide with a point in time where the target's cognitive defences are presumed weakened, is important. In this light, practices such as enrolling potential exiters while they are in prison and using presumably dependable go-betweens such as scholars, former extremists or family members, employed by a number of existing exit programmes, seem well placed' (108-1209).

Dalsgaard-Nielsen touch upon a whole range of approaches used by EXIT, Sweden in their approaches, on the effectiveness of which I shall expand, and especially why, in the articles. Points such as playing actively on the - in this case - motivated clients' doubt, affinity between coach and client (shared past

in the extremist right), the building of trust through joint activities - to entertain dialogue with the goal of adding complexity to increase doubt of the political narrative or ideological perspective, as well as presenting the client to various social and geographical surroundings to create alternative feelings and experiences in order to address both the cognitive and the embodied knowledge.

Not to handle the embodied knowledge in exit programmes is not to support the individual developing a different habitus and thus identity - in Holland's perspective, where habitus is part of coming to identify with new worlds in a paced version of Bourdieu (Holland et al. 1998) - than the one the individual has developed as part of the participation in extremist groups. The development of a different feeling of who we are, is what - I argue in the articles and here - makes the individual able to leave an extremist and criminal life - and not exchange one group for a different one - by getting engaged in different figured worlds through participation.

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# Article 1: To Study the Meaning of Social Interaction for Former Right Wing Extremists wanting to Disengage: Doing Participant Observation and Qualitative Interviews

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2014) "To Study the Significance of Social Interaction for Former Right Wing Extremists Wanting to Disengage: Doing Participant Observation and Qualitative Interviews", *SAGE Research Methods Cases Chapter*, <http://srmo.sagepub.com/view/methods-case-studies-2014/n140.xml>

## **Abstract:**

This is an article about the methodological part of a qualitative research project studying the significance of social interaction for former participants in Nazi and other right-wing extremist groups in Sweden wanting to disengage and deradicalise. It describes the qualitative research project from the design of the research question and the preliminary planning of the fieldwork to actually being there – in the field. As the fieldwork involved dealing with people in transition, it also meant dealing with people with very complex life stories and ambiguous identities and positions, which made it difficult to find an appropriate method that would capture the many aspects involved in the process. As I will describe in this article, it is often necessary to change your methods numerous times as your research progresses.

### Learning outcomes:

- The case shows how the methods used in a qualitative research project are a result of the research interest, but the outcomes also depend on what is feasible in the field.
- The case illuminates the differences between the planning of fieldwork and actually being in the field and how to deal with it.
- A better understanding of the difficulties and complexities of organising and carrying out research, including life history data, which can be stressful and painful to talk about in an interview.

## Research question and envisioned method

As Ladislav Holy and Milan Stuchlik write in their article ‘Anthropological Data and Social Reality’, fieldwork with participant observation is without doubt one of the most defining features of social anthropology. It conveys the image of research carried out directly among the people under study, usually for a considerable length of time, involving careful observation and documentation of the minutiae of their day-to-day life.

I am trained as a social anthropologist at Oslo University and am currently working on my thesis in the PhD programme ‘Social Psychology of Everyday Life’ at the Department of Social Psychology at Roskilde University in Denmark. In accordance with the ideals of classical anthropology, I had planned six to eight months fieldwork at Exit, a Stockholm-based organisation providing support to people seeking to leave extremist right-wing groups. The main research question which I sought to illuminate was the significance of social interaction in the subjective construction of identity in a process of transition. The staff at Exit are a mixture of social workers, academics and former right-wing extremists, who use their own experiences of disengagement to help others. The programme makes use of milieu-therapeutic activities and therapeutic dialogues between the staff and what they describe as their clients - people seeking to leave an extreme group behind - in an attempt to make the clients go through a transitional period, challenging them to redefine and negotiate their world views, self-perception, and ultimately their identity. Most Exit clients contact the organisation on their own initiative, while some are passed on through intermediaries like youth workers, police officers, teachers or parents. The individual is then given a coach, usually someone with personal experience as a former participant in the extremist right<sup>60</sup>. One of Exit’s

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<sup>60</sup> [http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/82A2FB65-27B0-4129-ACC5-284E2B4F5F43/0/leaving\\_terrorism\\_behind.pdf](http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/82A2FB65-27B0-4129-ACC5-284E2B4F5F43/0/leaving_terrorism_behind.pdf)



methods of working with their clients is to build a strong relationship between client and coach, as confidence between the two is seen as crucial for the interaction between them. The issues the clients are struggling with are often not only related to the reasons for joining, but also to the results of having taken part in an extremist group. As part of the trust-building method and the disengagement process, the coach and client undertake different activities together, such as weightlifting, going to cafes, museums or whatever the client wishes to do. The purpose is to strengthen the client's motivation for leaving the extremist group, broaden his/her social skills and to make him/her experience new emotions and ways of being.

To investigate my research questions I had planned to be in Stockholm for a period of six to eight months in order to be at Exit on a daily basis. I had envisaged following up to five clients and all activities connected to them. I wanted to grasp both the enunciated cognitive knowledge and the unspoken incorporated knowledge which would constitute Exit as the field of research in order to reach the kind of understanding that the anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup has termed 'embodied knowledge of the field'. Hastrup describes this as a particular kind of ethnographic experience, where thoughts, emotions and actions are united in an experience of the field.

The data was to be generated through my daily presence and the observation of the dialogue between staff and clients, in combination with life story-oriented interviews with both parties. Other sources of data were to come from the readings of reports, internet-based information and the participation in some of Exit's orientation activities, such as school meetings and conferences.

As it turned out, there were several obstacles that made it impossible to conduct the classical form of fieldwork.

Exit is a modern organisation with employees working 9 to 4, where many client-related activities take place outside the office, and issues are often discussed in the evenings on the telephone or behind closed doors in the office. Apart from these practical obstacles, it also became obvious that the dialogue between client and coach would be impossible to follow, as my presence would have such an impact on the situation that it would change beyond recognition, dissolving what I had imagined to be of great importance in answering my research question. So I had to think out new methods for me to understand the significance of interaction in the disengagement process. This also raised questions of how I could obtain enough information from both staff and clients to understand the very complex process taking place, which is the result of cooperation between client, coaches and Exit as an organisation

with other employees supporting the coaches. As it turned out, my fieldwork started changing before I even embarked on it - a journey which nonetheless was to lead to a much deeper understanding of my research question.

## My pre-understandings of the field and the design of the research question

Any research topic is influenced by academic and personal interests, which also condition our pre-understanding of the field that we enter when we embark upon fieldwork. My research questions had developed through two previous research projects I had conducted, which focused on communities and community-sustaining mechanisms among young people within a left wing-oriented social movement and in a religious community in Denmark. As several studies by Tore Bjørge, an anthropologist specialised in disengagement from extremist groups, show, ideological conviction seems in general to presuppose participation instead of ideology being the reason for it, and it often follows lines of friendships, emphasising the importance of social interaction in the shaping of a subjective world view.

While focusing on participants within particular groups or communities, I had also remarked how the process leading to disengagement from such groups is often understood to be an individual decision. Once I learned about Exit through a conference, I started wondering what it meant for an individual to leave a closed group behind. I was wondering how one then constructs meaning, a sense of belonging and identity, or whether disengagement would also depend on social interaction. I was also wondering to what extent the clients at Exit would regard their ability to disengage as a result of their contact with one or more employees in the organisation, and how they thought the coach(es) had influenced them.

My research into the left wing social movement had given me an understanding of how participation in such a movement meant participation in activities like parties, happenings and especially demonstrations, which would often involve confrontations with the police. Over time, the participants would come to experience these activities through the social movement's shared frame of understanding and interpretation, which would influence the participants' position and identity, transforming a person from a peripheral spectator to becoming a committed activist (Karpantschhof: 2007, Snow et al: 1986, Christensen: 2009).

This research formed my pre-understanding of the clients with whom Exit is working. I saw them as former political activists with an often violent and

criminal agenda, who, when they contacted Exit, had a clear desire to leave the extremist right. I had considered that the interviews might involve descriptions of violent situations and criminality and reflected on how I should handle that, but I had not thought about some of the informants as valuable subjects with a difficult life story about which they obviously thought it stressful and painful to talk.

My vision of the informants affected the way I prepared my interview guide, in which I only focused on arranging the questions in such a way that they led from one topic to the next in what I considered to be a natural chain of associations.

Through the interviews I had conducted with the left-wing activists I had learned that the informants' feelings about being part of something they considered very important as well as taking part in a great deal of action constituted the driving force for their continued participation. I assumed that these feelings would also be of significance to Exit clients' experiences.

As I had not been part of any extremist group myself, I could not presume to understand the emotional part of what participation meant to the informants. I could only refer to the feelings I had become familiar with via my interviews with the left-wing informants and how what they told me had conveyed their feeling of being in the centre of action, both when I did my interviews with them and when I participated in demonstrations with a high police presence. I started reading anthropological literature written by Katrine Fangen, among others, a Norwegian anthropologist who have done fieldwork among right-wing extremists, reports about the extremist right as well as autobiographies written by former right-wing extremists (Egonsson: 2012, Sadalin: 2010, Widerberg: 2001, Persson: 2003, Asplund: 2000, Arno: 2010, Hasselbach: 1994) in an attempt to deepen my understanding of the emotional aspect of participation and of the disengagement process (Kimmel: 2007, Eiternes and Fangen: 2002, Arnstberg and Hållén: 2000, Bjørge: 2009). My intention was to establish a better understanding of what I thought the informants' frames of reference would be to enable me to develop an interview guide and be as well prepared for the interviews as possible. Based on these references, I designed a first version of the interview guide, but as it turned out, I had to reformulate it endlessly until I finally gave it up at my third visit to Exit, a point I shall return to later.

## Doing fieldwork - from a pre-understanding of the field to being right there

The ideal for fieldwork ought to be the result of those methods which seem to be the most appropriate for answering the research question, but in reality, the choice of methods used is a result of different coincidences that add up to what it is possible to do in the field. Before I had even started, I had to redesign the fieldwork for the first time right after the first reaction from the leader of the client programme at Exit; she said that a six months' stay would be too heavy a burden for the organisation. Therefore, a new approach had to be developed as it was of paramount importance for me to uphold the focus of the research and thereby the organisation as the venue for the fieldwork<sup>61</sup>.

In recent years, the classical fieldwork paradigm has been contested, by, among others, Charlotte Aull Davies, who questions whether the duration of the stay in the field necessarily indicates the level of participation and thereby the validity of the ethnographic knowledge. This circumstance, and the fact that the duration of the stay at Exit needed to correspond with what Exit found acceptable, influenced the structure of my subsequent fieldwork. The time frame was reduced to three visits to Exit, each one lasting for two weeks, and an 'extra' week, when I participated in a training session with the staff. Before carrying out the first part of my official fieldwork, I had already participated in several conferences organised by Exit. I had also read the information material produced by the organisation<sup>62</sup> and an evaluation report<sup>63</sup> of their work. As anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup writes, by having access to material specifically dealing with the field you are entering, it is possible to establish a preliminary understanding of the field in an entirely different way than previously, when extensive fieldwork was the norm.

My plan for the first visit was to get to know the field in a much more detailed way. After this, I would be able to develop an interview guide, which I presumed would still change during the visits to come, as my understanding of the field expanded.

But, once more, what finally became my methods would result from a constant reformulation of my own wishes and plans in response to what was to be offered to me, and expected from me, by those involved.

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<sup>61</sup> As Exit was established in 1998, it is one of the oldest organisations of its kind in Europe. Many more deradicalisation and disengagement projects were established after 11 September 2001, but I was keen to perform my fieldwork at Exit as it was one of the most experienced organisations.

<sup>62</sup> <http://exit.fryshuset.se/>

<sup>63</sup> <http://www2.ungdomsstyrelsen.se/butiksadmin/showDoc/ff80808127e2ac190128babe13ef003c/wwwEXITrapportDel1.pdf>

One example is that I received an e-mail from Joachim, the director of Exit, just a few days before my departure, with a list of informants that I could interview upon arrival. Even though I did not at all feel prepared to do the interviews, I still thought it would be a good chance to learn much more about both clients and staff. At the same time, I felt that it could be a bad start and possibly create a negative attitude towards me if I tried to postpone the interviews that had already been arranged, as I know it takes considerable time to identify possible informants and organise a time and place to meet.

Exit is one of three organisations in the same office. There is Exit and Passus, which works with former gang members according to the methods developed by Exit, and CIDES (Centre for Information on Destructive Subcultures) works with developing and disseminating effective approaches for combating the formation of destructive subcultures, reducing their recruitment and facilitating defection<sup>64</sup>. The staff share the same kitchen, and several of them work for both Exit and Passus. That makes it easy to follow what is going on in the office in general, apart from the times when two or more employees would retire into one of the rooms to conduct a discussion behind closed doors. Many fieldwork situations are felt to be difficult and complex to relate to 'appropriately'. How can the researcher maintain a presence in ways which are not too awkward, without a clearly definable task or a role to fulfil?

In the office I often encountered a mixture of people, such as staff members, clients from Passus, somebody working as a trainee or employees who were at a midway stage between being clients and coaches. The latter had left their criminal lifestyle behind some years ago, but were still struggling with questions and problems to an extent such that they were neither expected to nor able to work full time as a coach. It was accepted to sit or even lie on the sofa in the office, just to make coffee or to sit at the table talking, opening up for a lot of different ways of 'just being' somebody there without fulfilling a clear-cut task.

I had conducted fieldwork many times before, where I often perceived the fieldwork situation as very awkward, making me feel shy and uncomfortable, but nonetheless I persevered with the fieldwork. To do fieldwork at Exit meant to be part of a very loose organisation with a particular reflexive praxis, which can basically be described as 'learning by doing'. The employees all seemed to be very sociable and were obviously used to different people passing through the office as well as dealing with peoples' actions, feelings and ways of interaction because of their job profile. Hence when I arrived I was

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<sup>64</sup> <http://cides.fryshuset.se/english/>

received in a very friendly and inclusive way. The employees informed me about things I thought could be of relevance to my research, I would ask if I could join them and was always allowed to do so. In that way I came to participate in several educational sessions for the staff, which turned out to be of particular importance for my understanding of the coaches' different methods of working with clients.

The fact that I liked the employees a great deal definitely also had an impact on my way of being there. My feeling comfortable made it easier to just ask questions and participate in meetings and to simply join in when some employees were sitting at the table talking. The atmosphere in the office would often be cheerful, and the employees would be very affectionate towards one another, being playful, teasing and laughing with each other, of all of which I felt I was part. Actually, I felt very honoured to have this opportunity to get to know them and learn about their work and practice. This resulted in an ongoing desire to further deepen my knowledge of the interviewees and the field. The employees were interested in the research, seeing it as a way of getting to know more about their own practices, which also meant that they would spare time for the interviews whenever I asked for it. I would participate in staff meetings, where Exit and Passus would discuss their work helping different clients and various other issues. These meetings would be very informative for me, as I would learn about their working methods as well as problems that the clients faced during the transition from gang member or right-wing extremist to a non-criminal life on their own terms. Every day I would take brief notes on a piece of paper and elaborate on them later on when I returned to my room.

After my first visit I started asking myself what exactly I should write down. How should I choose what to write down among the endless interplay of actions of people talking, coming, going, meeting, joking etc.? I tried different variations of writing down my observations. Reading it all after the fieldwork came to an end, I realised that what I had written down were interpretations of the things that had been said, of selections of how the employees interact and discuss their practices, of people coming and going and of situations related to the client work, combined with my own reflections about the place, its people and myself. Being there provided me with an insight into their practice, and it made me aware of various issues that I understood to be of great significance to their work, themes that I would investigate further in the interviews with clients, coaches and other staff.

Despite the fact that my primary interest was the interaction between client and coach, I soon realised the impossibility of pursuing that particular form of

contact; on the one hand, my presence would change the situation beyond recognition, and on the other, the interaction did not take place in the stereotypical and easy-to-follow form that I had previously imagined as a therapeutic dialogue with two people sitting in a room talking. The coach met the client in various everyday settings, such as weightlifting together, a trip to town, etc. The purpose was to avoid a face-to-face situation that would make many clients feel uncomfortable, and some of them might become defensive in what they perceived as a confrontational situation.

Instead of following these coach-client meetings any further, I decided to just stay in the office, follow the events as they unfolded and say 'yes' to whatever was proposed to me. Meanwhile, I actively asked the staff questions about phenomena I came to wonder about, I read some of the books in the office and tried to learn as much as I possibly could about the methods used when working with clients, as well as the ideas guiding the staff when they talked about their work. My aim was to gain an understanding of what I came to perceive as the practice of Exit.

My way of working on my initial research questions became somewhat like a jigsaw puzzle, as I brought together pieces of understanding by participating as far as I could, by asking questions, by taking a position where I actively made myself available to the others, by just sitting there or by actively engaging with people or doing small tasks that I could fulfil without being an employee (for example cutting out copies of money with an employee while we would talk about his job as a coach and about himself being a former participant in the White Power Movement and later on a gang member for many years). I would also be very aware of things I heard that I did not understand immediately. I wrote them down and made sure I remembered to ask the staff to explain them to me.

These kinds of informal conversations, combined with interviews with employees, coaches and clients and my participation in staff training courses on two occasions all provided pieces of information for what became my specific field of research: how Exit works and what significance this work has for their clients' construction of their self-narratives and identities.

## Conducting the interviews – can you capture everything?

My informants were, as already mentioned, employees with and without a past in the extreme right as well as former and present clients. The interviews with informants who had been involved in the extreme right posed a particular

problem, irrespective of whether the person had worked as a coach or simply been a client; in both cases their narratives were very dense.

To have been in the extreme right was problematical for all the former and present clients that I interviewed. This also meant that I would be completely dependent on the director of Exit, Joachim, as he was the one contacting former clients. Joachim had worked as a coach himself for almost ten years, and he would therefore know whom to contact and how to do so. This has of course influenced whom I have talked to, as all the potential informants would talk to Joachim before talking to me and would find out from him which aspects of their experience I was going to ask about and how the information would be used later on. I had also written a short presentation of the research, which could be sent out to potential informants promising them anonymity and that I would be the only one dealing with the interviews. Joachim would hand my phone number to a possible informant, and then we would organise a meeting.

This method of access also meant that I did not come to meet anybody who had started on the process but dropped out, as Joachim would probably not have been in touch with that person long enough for him to be a potential informant. Therefore I only interviewed people who actually thought that Exit had had significance in their deradicalisation and their way out of the extremist right.

The fact that the informants got in touch with me through an employee of Exit may have prevented the informants from being critical of the organisation, but may also have positioned me as somebody to be trusted.

Before I started working on my PhD project I had already conducted several interview-based investigations as a freelance anthropologist and researcher, thus I did not consider that conducting the interviews in this research would pose any particular difficulties. I initially planned the interviews in such a way that I would ask the informants to describe their specific life situation and elaborate on different themes during the interview. I would organise the interview guide with inspiration from other anthropologists such as James Spradley and Steinar Kvale, Professor of Educational Psychology and would start by asking what Spradley calls 'grand tour questions', which are supposed to generate general descriptions, followed by questions aiming at eliciting specific examples of something. I would for instance ask a former client: 'What was your situation like for Exit to be relevant to you?' and more specifically, questions such as: 'What activities did you do with the coach?' and 'Can you tell me what it was like to go to a museum for the first time?' and 'How did that make you feel?'



I had started working on my interview guide shortly before the first fieldwork, and according to my prior understanding of the informants as *either* a client *or* a coach, I divided the questions into three sections. One section focused on the past, i.e. what the situation was like for Exit to become an alternative for the informant. Another section focused on questions about what would lead to disengagement from an extremist group. The third one investigated the methods used when working with clients.

I would have about four pages filled with questions, which I thought could be used both as questions to be asked, but also as a kind of checklist in order to lead the conversation. This arrangement seemed logical to me, at least as long as all the informants had a clear-cut position of being *either* client *or* coach *or* another type of employee. But as already mentioned, the positions turned out to be much more complex as some coaches would be in a process of transition. They would be coaches, but at the same time, they were also working with themselves with help from other employees to handle their own past. The confusing positions soon affected my interview guide, since it became unclear which questions would be the most relevant in some interviews: questions aiming at understanding the informant's own disengagement process, questions about the work as a coach or questions about the transition from one status to another.

I would start each interview by explaining to the informant that I was interested in talking about the disengagement process if the informant was a client. But if the informant was an employee, I would focus on which methods he or she used when working with the clients and why. If the informant was a coach with a past in the extremist right, I would try to conduct several interviews to cover both his own engagement and disengagement process and his work with the clients.

My first interview was completely overwhelming as I realised that I had a rather preconceived understanding of how people would become involved with the extreme right, and here I was sitting with a person who had been raised with grandparents reading 'Mein Kampf' by Adolf Hitler and who in several other ways had introduced him to Nazism. Not in my wildest dreams had I imagined that this could be a way into right-wing extremism, a way that made my further interview guide seem completely irrelevant. Instead I just went along with the conversation and asked whatever questions came to my mind in order to establish a frame of understanding. During the interview I also had the feeling that we often jumped from one topic to a completely different one, which made it extremely demanding to follow the thread of the conversation.

This initial interview made me realise just how complex and chaotic a life story of this kind is to follow for the researcher and to communicate for the interviewee, and this experience was repeated in other interviews. It gave me the feeling that there was so much to learn and that I would have to meet the informants many times, a feeling which I could not shake off during my entire fieldwork. But here, everyday practicalities again played a role.

I thought it might be a good idea to find three or four informants that I could meet with several times in order to collect as many details as possible. However, this turned out to be difficult to pursue in practice as I would not meet the informants on a daily basis in Stockholm, but would have to organise a meeting with the help of Joachim every time I travelled to Stockholm from Denmark. I ended up interviewing any former clients whom Joachim had contacted, and I finally discarded my original interview guide. Instead I reduced it to three main themes, asking the informant about the life situation he/she had been in before his first contact with Exit, how Exit had helped and details about the disengagement process. I used these three themes as key headings and then I would ask questions during the interview to get as much elaboration on the answers as possible.

I found that this method worked much better as I became less stressed without all my prepared questions and I came to pay much more attention and became ready to talk about any subject which the informant introduced. I would be careful to get details about anything which the informants thought had made a change in their lives during the disengagement process.

I interviewed a total of 11 former clients, meeting several of them more than once. I think it is very important to meet informants as many times as possible to try to understand a person's complex life story, especially when it contains aspects which the interviewee has difficulty understanding him or herself.

When this is the case, I am also wondering whether we can claim that the interview is one of the best ways of understanding human beings and their explanations of their actions, especially with regard to all the processes that the informant does not understand him or herself. It is difficult to know how to deal with answers like 'I don't know, it's more or less in a haze' or 'I still don't understand how I could end up in something like this (the extreme right wing)', because the feelings leading to participation for example, or to disengagement may still be unacknowledged or impossible to identify.

I was struggling with these questions during my fieldwork, and they remain for a large part unresolved. I am still wondering whether interviews and short-term fieldwork are the best way to deal with matters of this kind. I am also wondering how many times one can reasonably ask a person to come for in-

interviews, unless one is fortunate enough to meet someone with whom one can make a clear agreement about the entire process. If the researcher chooses to ignore that question, the result will be an ethical problem instead of a methodological one.

## Conclusion

Even though my plan for fieldwork was clear at the outset, I ended up redesigning it in an ongoing process. I follow the working practices and interviewed clients, coaches and the other employees, I learned about the interactions and what it meant for the clients to have (had) a coach as well as the different ideas and methods involved in the tools used with the clients.

When transcribing my data, I have also come to realise that my data are not distinct narratives where I can identify a clear transition from one position to another in each story. Instead, what ended up being my method(s) created data about several long and very complex narratives, revealing some of the different inputs, thoughts, reflections, activities and incidents, which together reflect the reasons for a transition from being active in the extremist right wing to being in a position where one meets with an anthropologist to share one's story of transition and all the factors that helped one on the way.

This means that there are many possibilities in the field, but what I consider most important when in the field is to be absolutely clear about what one's research question is and then to be open to different ways to deepen one's knowledge about one's particular field of interest by asking questions and by saying 'yes' to whatever would seem to lead to a better understanding of the field.

### **Discussion questions suitable for classroom use:**

- How can you prepare yourself the best possible solution for your particular fieldwork? Give examples.
- When you are in the field, what are you going to observe and why?
- How are you going to describe your observations?
- How can you best prepare yourself for interviewing informants who find the subject difficult to talk about?
- What are the advantages (and disadvantages) of interviewing the same informant several times and how to organise it?

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# Article 2: The Challenge of Researching neo-Nazis Struggling to Leave the White Power Movement

This article is an extended version (8,042 words) of an article (5,932 words) published as part of Deuchar, Ross and Bhopal, Kalwant, eds., (2015): 'The complexities and dilemmas of researching marginalised groups', Routledge

## **Abstract:**

The aim of this article is to provide insight into the methodological challenges researchers must consider when planning an anthropological study of hard-to-reach groups such as (former) right-wing extremists who are in the process of leaving the movement. The article describes the research process from developing the research questions and describing the setting to conducting participant observations and interviews. The article points to some of the challenges involved in interviewing people with dense life stories, to whom the researcher has limited access, but also provides some answers by pointing to how contextual knowledge can overcome some of these difficulties.

## The challenge of researching neo-Nazis struggling to leave the White Power Movement

'To my mind, this progress from ruin to correction is intimately connected to the nature of knowledge itself, which is, at best, a process: from ignorance to awareness, from intellectual 'ruin' to its 'correction', from indistinct chaos to orderly scholarship. Knowledge therefore encompasses at once the starting point, which is empty, harmful, painful, and the end point, which is pleasure. To my mind, it is this quality of process, of development, which can only take place over time, that answers, finally, the question of why knowledge must

come from a tree. A tree is a thing that grows; and growth, like learning, can only happen over and through time itself.' (Mendelsohn 2008:58)

Anthropological knowledge can be thought of as the outcome of a process that starts with an extended period of social interaction. Long-term fieldwork 'out there' has traditionally been presented as the preferred method of anthropologists in search of the 'native's point of view'. In recent years, the *field* of anthropology has moved 'home', making organisations a typical setting for fieldwork. In this case, the stay in the *field* has to be negotiated, as the researcher's activities must be coordinated with those being researched.

In the present study, my fieldwork was limited to three short periods, in accordance with the organisation EXIT's<sup>65</sup> wishes. EXIT is a Swedish NGO that supports (former) right-wing extremists who are in the process of leaving the White Power Movement.

Using anthropological methods I strived to understand the process right-wing extremists go through when leaving the scene behind. This is a demanding task as complex stories of radical change take time to unravel. The limited possibility of continuous interaction in the field led me to reflect on how to approach informants and on the interview as a method.

As Daniel Mendelsohn (2008) writes, knowledge is the outcome of a process, a development that takes place over time. This made me doubt the outcome of interviews and what insight I could gain during a short period of fieldwork with only limited possibilities of meeting certain informants more than once. The aim of this article is to discuss whether insight gained through fieldwork is inevitably related to time, perceived as the possibility of extended interaction. In the first part of the article, I debate the outcome of ethnographic fieldwork<sup>66</sup>. Then I move on to discuss why interviewing former neo-Nazis is a challenge, especially when access is limited.

By doing so, I wish to provide insight into the methods used, which I hope can shed light on the challenges researchers need to consider

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<sup>65</sup> This article is a result of a PhD project I am currently working on (2011-2014) at the Department of Psychology and Educational Studies at Roskilde University in Denmark.

<sup>66</sup> Ethnographic methods such as qualitative interviews sometimes combined with a few days of observation have in recent years been applied by social scientists and researchers in humanities. These methods use the vocabulary from anthropology, but are not to be confused with *ethnographic fieldwork* as understood in social anthropology. In the discipline, fieldwork refers to a method where the researcher emerges him/herself in the field over extended periods of time to gain a profound insight into people's culture and daily life; see e.g. Hastrup and Hervik 1994, Hastrup 1992.

when conducting research among hard-to-reach people with complex life stories. Furthermore, I want to point out how contextual knowledge can overcome some of the challenges involved in this sort of study, and how I – in spite of the limited time available – gained an understanding of a wide range of issues at stake in the support of – and the undertaking of – a radical change of lifestyle.

My fieldwork took place at EXIT, a Swedish NGO. EXIT's staff comprises a mix of former neo-Nazis<sup>67</sup> now working as mentors, social workers and academics, making the organisation's practice an outcome of many different competences. EXIT supports individuals in the process of leaving the White Power Movement by connecting them to a mentor: staff members who have a past as right-wing extremists. In EXIT's daily work, mentees are referred to as *clients* and mentors as *coaches*. The aim of EXIT's work is to create a relationship between *clients* and *coaches* through joint activities in order to enable and open up a dialogue about the clients' past, present and future and help them leave the extremist right, socially and mentally.

## The research questions

My fieldwork at EXIT was an outcome of my previous research into participants in a left-wing social movement – the 'Youth House Movement' (Ungdomshusbevægelsen) — in Copenhagen in 2007. The study convinced me of the overwhelming impact social interaction, collective actions and circulating stories can have on members in a social movement, extremist group or any closed social setting with an explicit agenda. Participation in the social interaction and collective actions of the Youth House Movement made the members identify with the movement and its frame of references. The vision of reality, as it was presented in the movement, appeared to condition the participants' frame of understanding and interpretation, which – to varying degrees – came to constitute their self-understanding and identity (Snow et al. 1986, Tarrow 1994, Porta 1998, Karpantschof 2007, Christensen in Karpantschof & Lindholm 2009, Christensen 2009).

As I became familiar with the group dynamics and social processes involved in the Youth House Movement, I began to wonder about the significance of social interaction for a person in the process of leaving a closed group. This

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<sup>67</sup> I use the terms 'right-wing extremist' and 'neo-Nazis' as synonyms, although I am aware that not all right-wing extremists are neo-Nazis, whereas all neo-Nazis are right-wing extremists.



made me interested in EXIT and the interaction between the coach (a former neo-Nazi) and the client (the one leaving an extremist group behind).

I wondered where a person in an exit process would turn in his/her search for alternative views and references. And what role would the relationship between the individual wishing to exit and the employees at EXIT play in that process? I wanted to identify what the clients themselves experience as supportive in the process and how EXIT has developed its practice on the basis of the former neo-Nazi staff members' experiences during their own exit processes and the challenges they faced on their paths to becoming social workers. I therefore found it important to observe EXIT's different approaches as they have developed in response to issues related to an exit as they provide information on points of significance in the exit process itself.

The research questions are also a result of my basic epistemological assumptions of the process people undergo in forming their self-understanding and identity, as expressed by Holland et al. (1998:7):

‘...the development of identities and agency...is...specific to practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed “worlds”....’

This vision emphasizes that identities are improvised in the flow of activity within specific social situations from the cultural resources at hand.

This approach to identity formation has crucial features in common with social movement theory, as both theories connect identity formation to participation in a situated practice.

In an anthropological investigation, the research question in dialogue with the empirical setting is decisive for what comes to constitute the field and the methods applied. Since the methods are always an outcome of the possibilities in the field, they and the choice of what theories to apply in analysing the material cannot be decided on beforehand. Anthropological knowledge develops through a constant dialogue between the manifest and the hypothetical (Hasse 2011, Hastrup 1992, 2004).

## The field of research

As I wanted to focus on both EXIT's staff and the clients, choosing a method was a challenge as the approach divided the field into different settings. On the one hand, there was the EXIT office, where I could observe the staff's social practices. On the other hand, there were the former and present clients, who had different reasons for having been involved in an extremist group and

different experiences of the process leading up to their exit and, finally, of being clients. The clients were individuals, scattered in and around Stockholm, and the exit process was the only known common denominator linking them together as an analytical category. This made fixed appointments and semi-structured interviews seem the best methodical possibility.

It can take time to find people who are willing to talk about their past and present when they have been connected to neo-Nazism as (former) neo-Nazis are one of the most stigmatized groups in Sweden and elsewhere.

Originally, I planned my fieldwork as a six months' continuous stay in Stockholm. I imagined that this would allow me to follow, on a daily basis, EXIT's staff and four or five specific clients in the process of exiting. During the entire process, my contact person at EXIT was Joachim.

When I first contacted him, he was in charge of the client programme and agreed to me staying for six months. But he changed positions, and the new head of the client programme thought that having an anthropologist stay so long would interfere in the daily routine. Therefore, we agreed on three stays of two weeks each.

This huge reduction of time raised questions of how I should organise my research in terms of methodology and whether I would be able to obtain a deep understanding of the issues involved in such a complex process. On the positive side, the intervals would allow me to review my material and prepare for the next visit. The situation demonstrates how significant individuals' ideas about the effects of fieldwork can have a decisive impact on the planning of it. My research questions made me dependent on EXIT's willingness to let me be at the office and to put me in touch with their former and present clients. Before I arrived at EXIT, Joachim had asked me for a letter that he could send to possible informants about me and the issues I would be asking them about. As Joachim became the one who found present and past clients willing to do interviews, he also became the gatekeeper. I was dependent on him making appointments for me as I had no other possibilities of knowing about former or present clients. Whenever Joachim got a 'yes' from a present or past client, he would give that person my phone number, and he/she would sometimes contact me directly. In other cases, Joachim would just give me the names and the dates of the interviews.

This arrangement had an impact on the research. I have, for example, not talked to any previous clients who had stopped their involvement with EXIT since they have not kept in touch and are impossible to contact – for me and EXIT - if they have returned to their extremist groups. The informants I ended up interviewing had been clients for different lengths of time; some for

several years, while others had just recently started, and yet others had gone through the process five to ten years previously.

After the first visit was agreed on, I left for Sweden. I had imagined the first visit as a kind of introduction to the field and preparation for the interviews I had planned for the visits to come. Upon arrival, I realised that Joachim had already arranged several interviews for me. This highlights how method is nowadays an outcome of a joint venture between the researcher and the researched.

## Participant observations as a means of broadening perspectives

In the field I wanted to grasp the context of EXIT's work and its meaning as well as the staff's actions. I was, therefore, looking for both the reflected and the unreflected common sense and habits of the staff and the implicit meaning of their (inter)actions, doings and interpretations of themselves and the world (Hastrup and Hervik 1994).

What constitutes the 'unreflected common sense and habits' at EXIT can also be described as culture knowledge. Culture knowledge is acquired through a situated learning process, which over time shapes the participants' frame of interpretation and points out issues of central importance to the participants in the specific realm of reality. The newly arrived – anthropologist or not – in any unfamiliar realm of reality goes through a process of learning to get the 'native' sense of the world, but it is important to underscore that we do have different experiences, positions and interests that give us divergent positions within the particular realm of reality (Hasse 2002).

One way of investigating a meaning system connected to a social practice is by immersing yourself in the others' world in order to comprehend as many aspects and cohesions as possible. It is, in accordance with Hastrup (1994), through dialogue (language) and non-verbal activities (body movements, incorporated knowledge and reflective experiences) that I came to know of many of the nuances and implications of the field. As the atmosphere at EXIT is relaxed, it opens up for different ways of 'just being' somebody there, without fulfilling a clear-cut task. By being there on a daily basis, during what ended up being two months, I expanded my insight into the field. By engaging myself in the staff's daily life, I was inevitably introduced to a whole range of themes that I could not have known of beforehand (Hastrup 1994) and that I needed to grasp in order to be able to understand EXIT's practice and the issues involved in the exit process.

In recent years, EXIT has seen a rise in members from organized gangs struggling with issues similar to those of right-wing extremists leaving their lives as neo-Nazis behind. As a result, a sister organisation, Passus, has been established, which works according to the same methods as EXIT, but is aimed at gang members. Coaches from EXIT and Passus are based in the same office and often overlap each other with client issues (Christensen 2014).

As the office is small, it is easy to follow the action taking place. Every day in the office there were people with different positions. The daily staff members were there, but also somebody doing an internship and semi-employees, who were at a midway stage between being clients and coaches. Passus's clients (former gang members) also hung out there sometimes. The semi-employees had left their extremist and often criminal lifestyle behind some years ago, but were still struggling with questions related to the past to such an extent that they were neither expected to, nor able to, work full time as coaches (Christensen 2013).

Many of the staff's discussions in the office were about clients. In these discussions, both coaches and social counsellors participated. The members of staff who had a past as right-wing extremists were able to bring perspectives into the discussions from both worlds: the world of the active extremist, whose mindset they knew from their own experience, and from the clients and the world of the coach, with all the tools they could use when working with the clients. They were able to provide me with insight into what it is like to be an active right-wing extremist, what it does to you and the issues at stake in an exit process. I experienced situations in which I also began to understand the different perspectives and - as the example below illustrates - the social processes involved on the path from being a client/extremist/criminal to becoming, for example, a social worker/coach.

## Learning to understand how to become a coach

Between two of my stays at EXIT, a new coach, Magnus, had started. The aim was for Magnus to learn the practice of a coach by participating in the office's activities and discussing issues he found difficult to handle with more experienced coaches. Magnus' situation paralleled mine as we were both newcomers to the office. Through his learning process I became aware of significant aspects of coaching as they were pointed out to him in subtle ways at meetings, in discussions and interactions with more experienced staff.

One of the situations that broadened my understanding of the issues at stake in working with clients arose when Magnus asked an experienced coach for

advice. Magnus had for years been involved in a criminal gang himself; the first client he was assigned to was therefore a former gang member. The client had problems fulfilling his role as a father, which Magnus thought affected the client's children in very negative ways. Magnus himself had had an extremely manipulative father, and this made it difficult for him to tackle the situation with the client without losing his temper. By talking to Jeff, a very experienced coach, Magnus – and I, the anthropologist, who listened in and observed – gained insight into several issues at the same time.

Jeff told Magnus, using examples from his own life, about how he played with his daughter. Jeff had come to realise that he found it boring to play with dolls with his daughter, making the situation negative for both of them. Instead he had introduced her to swings, which they both enjoyed. Jeff also told Magnus that the activity did not need to go on for long; 10 – 15 minutes was enough to fulfil his daughter's desire for that activity. He explained how Magnus could help his client to reflect on what forms of interaction he thought could be fun for both him and his sons.

What Jeff wanted Magnus to make his client realise – through experience – was that, by finding an activity that both he and the children enjoyed, the atmosphere at home would improve as the children would most likely be happier. Since the client would get a positive response from the children, it would make him feel better. Therefore, according to Jeff, he might want to experience that feeling again, which might incline him to repeat his actions.

This, the thinking seemed to be, might make him change his behaviour and, through the help of his coach, make him realise that different actions can give different emotional experiences. But what the situation also did was to give Jeff, together with Magnus, a chance to deconstruct the social relations and the implications of different actions. Through the example of the child, Jeff indirectly found an opportunity to make Magnus understand that, by making your activity correspond to what you think a person needs, you can actually prevent problems and thereby turn a potentially negative experience into a positive one.

Through the talk, Magnus received advice on how to support his client and how to be a coach. He was given a concrete example of how he could talk to a client through the way Jeff talked to him – by deconstructing a situation into small pieces, making it possible to see how A might lead to B. But Magnus may also have gained an understanding of how to analyse social situations by getting a better overview of a difficult one. This could help Magnus adjust his own conduct in a social context – he was still struggling with his own past and anger – and also in relation to his work as coach. Magnus could be inspired to

reflect on tools he could use to understand how he could work not only with his client, but also with himself.

The situation also gave me insight into how a ‘client-coach’ conversation works: how coaches, by adding details and choices to a description, can help clients see social situations as open-ended, that is, as something whose outcome they are able to influence. This can help clients realise that they are part of a context and what goes on in it and provide them with tools to handle social situations.

Situations like this one advanced my understanding at several levels. I understood the situation as an example of how someone in the process of becoming a coach could learn to support his client(s). But I also experienced the episode as an example of how coaches work with clients, which added to my overall understanding of the field that I would use when I interviewed clients. I would categorise the situation as ‘one way of working with clients’ and as an example of how EXIT is based on a practice of ‘learning by doing’ and how that learning takes place (Christensen 2014)<sup>68</sup>.

## Learning about EXIT’s practice through participation

My participation in EXIT’s weekly meetings about present and potential clients was yet another situation that allowed me to experience how EXIT supports their clients. During weekly meetings, the staff would discuss potential clients, which gave me an understanding of how the employees pooled their different competences to create a multifaceted picture of what should be taken into consideration when assessing potential clients.

In one case, the potential client was under threat and needed a secure place for him, his wife and baby to live for a while. First, former gang members among staff were asked by the leader about their impressions of the client. How serious did they think his desire to disengage was? How serious did they think the threats against him were?

Then the staff members decided who among the coaches would be able to conduct activities with him during the day and on some nights. Friday and Saturday nights are the most ‘dangerous’, according to staff, in terms of the client ‘relapsing’ into old habits and calling friends in the gang. Then, a contact person was identified.

The next task was for the social counsellors to assess what kind of help they would need in relation to the baby. It is standard practice in Sweden for a healthcare worker to visit families with a baby in their home. As the client and

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<sup>68</sup> <http://srmo.sagepub.com/view/methods-case-studies-2013/n140.xml>

his family would need to live under cover for a while, they would not be able to get help from a public healthcare worker, so a private one - who would understand the delicate situation - would be needed.

Finally, the staff discussed the furniture in the safe house. The client would not be allowed to bring any furniture himself or choose curtains or anything for the apartment as he was not supposed to feel too much at home, as that feeling could prevent him from moving on and taking new responsibility for his life. Situations like this, where different perspectives of success or failure for the client were discussed, gave me an understanding of the social and practical side of leaving a gang-oriented life behind and how the staff – from both EX-IT and Passus – solved the issues involved together.

During one of my first visits, I was informed that the coaches were going to take a course called ‘Criminality as a lifestyle’. The course dealt with the driving force behind a criminal career and possible ways of making criminals reflect on their lifestyle as a means of motivating them to change.

I was allowed to join the course, which included group work with former criminals and social workers. This gave me even more details about ‘life as a criminal’, for example, the anger involved, the influence of a rough background and forms of teamwork such as preparing for robbery. But more importantly, the course also taught me much more about how the coaches worked with their clients. It made me realise just how demanding it is to have a serious criminal career as it affects one’s entire life and how, after leaving this lifestyle, it remains a daily challenge for years to avoid falling back into old patterns of behaviour. The participants with criminal backgrounds made me grasp how dramatic and difficult it is to leave it all behind.

The course also made me comprehend the emotional consequences the participants experienced after their involvement in gangs or extremist groups. This was indispensable background information for me to have when I interviewed coaches and former and present clients.

During my last stay, I was once again told that the employees were going to do a course, this time called ‘The motivational interview’. This is a type of dialogue in which one participant questions the other with the aim of increasing the other’s motivation for making or adhering to a decision. But at the same time, the interviewer is careful to make the other participant draw his/her own conclusions during the conversation – without specifically telling him/her what to conclude. To give an example: a young man is using a dangerous amount of drugs. He tells the interviewer that he does not have a drug problem. His only problem, according to him, is that drugs are illegal, which makes the risk of imprisonment the problem rather than the drug abuse. The inter-

viewer might then ask whether, since it is so nice to use drugs, he might want to give drugs to his children. Most likely the drug user will say 'No' and then he - himself - will start describing all the disadvantages there are to drugs. During the course, the coaches discussed some of the problems they were struggling with. For example, one of the participants, a man I had interviewed several times and about whom I had noticed a tendency to dominate discussions, suddenly revealed how tired he was of that attitude as he could see it made others 'give up' when talking to him. He said that it had been his way of showing power, enforcing hierarchy and gaining control over others during his life as a high-ranking gang member.

This comment made me realise the extent to which gang life shapes people's self-understanding, identity and behaviour - even their (body) language - and how demanding it is to change identity and to leave what has been their social network and life.

By being present in EXIT's office on a daily basis, I was able to experience the different tools involved in the assessment and support of the clients, as well as the wide range of issues and institutions involved in the work. I described the different episodes in my field notes. If there were any issues I wondered about, I asked an employee to expand on them, which gave me a more in-depth understanding of the field.

Participant observation gave me indispensable insight into a range of issues I could not have known about beforehand and that I would never have asked about by myself, as I would not have understood their significance to the people in the field. During my stay at EXIT as well as the intervals between my fieldwork periods, these insights led me to further reflection and questions, which I then explored in the interviews with employees with or without a neo-Nazi past and with former and present clients.

## Preparing the interviews

Before going into the field, I read ethnographic descriptions of the extreme right and the disengagement of former terrorists. I also read as much as I could find about EXIT in an attempt to acquire a detailed understanding of their work and its significance. In addition, I participated in a conference arranged by EXIT and followed lectures by EXIT coaches about their work. I knew from the start that I would have only a limited amount of time in the field. Therefore, I carefully planned the interviews I would be conducting with both staff and former and present clients to try to speed up the data collection process. I ended up conducting 35 hours of interviews with 23 individuals, six



of whom were employees, including three with a past as extremist right-wingers, who now worked as coaches, and eight present and former clients. In addition to the ethnographic readings I did in preparation for fieldwork, I spent a day in Stockholm to organize my stay at EXIT, and I got hold of some of the many autobiographies written by former right-wing extremists from Sweden, Germany and the US that EXIT has on their shelves. I read these books throughout my fieldwork in an attempt to enhance my understanding of as many aspects as possible of what it is like to be an active right-wing extremist and to gain insight into the emotional sense of group members' experiences as well as the process leading to disengagement (Egonsson 2012, Sadalin 2010, Widerberg 2001, Persson 2003, Asplund 2000, Arno 2010, Hasselbach 1994, Kimmel 2007, Eiternes and Fangen 2001, Arnstberg and Hällén 2000, Bjørge 2009, 1997).

The autobiographies gave me insight into how people join the extreme right and a neat explanation of the way in which they managed to leave. The impressions I got from these books, combined with the understanding I had gained of participation in a social movement through my previous research, constituted my starting point for creating an interview guide. But the literature left me unprepared for the many complex and interrelated issues related to a drastic change of lifestyle and the difficult life stories that are often concealed behind the road to participation and the way out. During my work on the interview guide, I got an impression of the difficulty of this sort of interview, as the interviews would include three to four related, but at the same time distinct, themes.

One theme was the way into the extremist right. It was important to understand the interviewees' narrative about their entry into the movement, to find out why and how they had got involved, how long they had been active and in what type of group: a well-established group, a loose network of racist youths, a right-wing terror organisation or a group with a kind of political party structure? What had been their position in the group? A second theme was the process leading up to the desire to leave the extremist right, a third was the process of becoming a client in EXIT, and the fourth theme would naturally cover their present life and plans for the future. When interviewing staff and coaches, I planned to address yet another theme as I also had questions about their work with clients and how, in the case of coaches, their own past played a role in the work they do now.

During my first stay at EXIT, I interviewed mainly the coaches about their past, but I also did interviews with a few former and present clients. The interview session was to be arranged as an appointment for an interview, which

already creates specific expectations of what will take place and assigns specific roles to both the interviewee and the interviewer.

Already during the first interview I began to think about the impact of time in relation to this specific field. When doing fieldwork, relationships with people within the field are of crucial importance to the researcher's ability to understand what is at stake. But relationships take time to establish and develop and, I would claim, cannot be hurried. Building relationships involves dialogue, engagement, humour, the discovery of a shared interest and other investments that create trust. In a field centred on stigmatized and vigilant people - as former neo-Nazis are - relationships and trust seem even more important as they often constitute the researcher's access to understanding the field. So the question remained of how to tackle the fieldwork when time was so limited. And what kind of data can a researcher gather through an interview of this kind?

## Conducting interviews

EXIT's staff members are open and inclusive in general, and they received me in a very positive way from the outset. Moreover, I had many things in common with the staff: we were first and foremost interested in the same subject - their work, clients' stories, extremism, radicalisation - but we also shared, for example, a sense of humour, political views and more or less looked the same, which, I think, made my integration into the field a lot easier. In the case of the present and former clients, it was absolutely essential that Joachim was the one who contacted the informants as they seemed to extend their enormous trust in him to me.

Nonetheless, I realised during the first interviews that, in the beginning, some of the informants with a past in the extremist right suspected me of judging them very negatively or of believing them to be outright idiots. I often felt that when we had talked for some time and they began to be convinced that my interest in them and their story was really genuine, they seemed to relax somewhat and open up. But still the interviews were difficult, as the interview situation made the interviewee, for whom the past seemed to be associated with feelings of shame and vulnerability, show signs of distress when asked about it, which had an impact on the interview. Some wiped their hands on their trousers and/or developed red spots on their neck. Others kept repeating the same phrases whenever I asked about the past, for example, *'No good comes from participating in the extremist right'*, *'No good comes from it'*. In some cases, talking about the past also meant reviving memories of, for example, rape,

court trials with the intense sense of being hated by everyone in the courtroom and thoughts of suicide as the only possible way out; feelings that would obviously have an impact on the interviewee, but certainly also on me, the interviewer.

My first reaction was a desire to rush through the interviews in order to let the informant and me get out of this stressful and uncomfortable situation. But my way of handling it was to remain as calm as I could and to avoid forcing conversations about issues the informants found it difficult to talk about, both because they often seemed to lack words, but especially because the memories seemed painful and their descriptions were often accompanied by verbal expressions of shame, regret and bewilderment.

For many of the informants, involvement in the extremist right was one subject in a story of a difficult upbringing, personal problems or desires to belong, which I asked further questions about. But I did not ask why an informant was showing signs of distress, and I always told the informants that they were of course in charge of the topic, in the sense that if I asked them about something they did not want to talk about, they could say so and we could change the subject and that they could stop the interview at any time. I also started each interview by explaining how I intended to use the data and that very special and easy identifiable details would not be used in any way. Nobody else would listen to the recorded interviews as I would transcribe them myself and they did not need to mention their name or surname while the dictaphone was on. Moreover, I would answer honestly any questions they asked me, and in general tell things about myself. I always think that informants, in general, tell a lot about themselves and thereby show trust in the interviewer, and therefore the interviewer ought to do the same, if and when asked by the interviewee.

An interview of this kind is very demanding as the subject involves a radical change of lifestyle and conviction. This means that at first, you, as the interviewer, are keen to gain insight into the informant's past and his/her meaning system at the time. Then you move on to yet another theme involving a process through which the interviewee has left his/her starting point – the engagement in the extreme right. Finally, in different ways and together with the informant, you investigate and interpret the entire process.

The change of lifestyle and – over time – perception of self-understanding and world view create a dense life story, but also one that at times seems very difficult for the interviewee to understand when he/she is asked to describe it in retrospective. 'What happened?' 'Why did I end up being an extremist right-winger?' In the case of many of the informants who had a past as extremist

right-wingers, I often felt that they were still looking for words to be able to identify and thereby tell themselves and me some of the many issues involved in the process of becoming one.

These interviews were by no means my first ones. I had, as noted, carried out research projects before this study and had additionally worked as a freelance anthropologist, carrying out observations and conducting qualitative interviews for municipalities, large companies and ministries for years. Thus I had done several hundred interviews with very different categories of people, for example, left-wingers, Christians in Denmark and the Lebanon, long-term recipients of social welfare benefits and top leaders about their way to the top. My experience is that when as a researcher you conduct a semi-structured interview, you move from one subject to the next, in what appears to be a chain of related associations. I had created the interview guide with inspiration from anthropologists such as Spradley (1979) and Kvale (1994) and had planned to start by asking what Spradley calls 'grand tour questions', which are supposed to generate general descriptions, followed by questions aimed at eliciting specific examples of something. But I knew that the interviews in this study would be different in the sense that they would be characterised by the informant jumping from one topic to a completely different one, making it very exhausting to follow as interviewer and impossible to move from one question to the next in an associative manner. These issues would, I think, have been much easier to deal with if I had stayed in Stockholm, which might have made repeated interviewing easier to organise. But I was going back and forth from Copenhagen to Stockholm, and the fact that Joachim was the one in contact with the informants, combined with the informants' distressed reactions, prevented me from making repeated appointments with the same informant.

This means that I have interviewed the coaches several times, whereas I have only carried out repeated interviews with a few clients. As I wanted to understand as many details and nuances of the exit process as possible, my strategy became, whenever I got to know of issues through participant observation in the office, to ask the informant to expand on that subject. Also, when I gained new insight from one informant, I would ask the next informant further questions about the same topic. When I was not in the field, I would listen to and transcribe the interviews word for word. The transcriptions of what was actually said and not said, when the informant paused and showed signs of doubt, insecurity and other emotions gave me a great deal of information about the process. If there was anything that a client said that made me wonder, I asked one of the coaches in EXIT about it and searched for further details. For ex-

ample, I asked a client about what sort of activities she had carried out with her coach. She found it difficult to answer. During the interview she was visibly nervous and said that she found it strange to be back in EXIT's office<sup>69</sup>. Later on, I asked the person in the office I knew had been her coach if he could remember what they had done together and why they had carried out precisely these activities. But there was a limit to the kind of questions I could carry from client to coach, as I had to be careful not to pass on any personal information from one informant to the other.

I wished I could have had the opportunity to spend more time with a few of the client informants so that we could have met several times and perhaps even have ended up doing things together. I would have preferred to avoid having the interview situation as the first encounter, or to combine it with informal dialogue. I experienced talking to former or present clients during short walks when one of them would, for example, accompany me to the train station. In these situations they often told me more stories of the impact of their former life on the present. For example, one client told me, as we walked down the steps from his flat, how he had had to move from the first to the fifth floor after somebody threw a stone through a window, and, he told me as we crossed the local park, how he had only recently given up carrying a knife and brass knuckles in his pocket to protect himself against former enemies.

These stories carried with them details of the sort that Hylland-Eriksen (2013) refers to when he talks about the themes informants bring up in time-intensive fieldwork, because they are important to them and which most likely would not emerge in a semi-structured interview as the interviewer cannot know about their importance, and there are no references that make them relevant for the interviewee to mention. The 'unreflected common sense and habits' of the informants and the implicit meaning of their (inter)actions, doings and interpretations of themselves and the world remain difficult to obtain in a fixed and non-repeated interview setting (Hastrup and Hervik 1994).

## Conclusion

To return to the quote by Mendelsohn (2008), knowledge is indeed connected to a process of reflection that takes place over time; I realised that, even though I had limited time to interact with my informants in the field. However, through a combination of different means I have reached an understanding

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<sup>69</sup> It was the only interview with a (former) client which I did in the office. Otherwise I would meet the former or present clients elsewhere.

of the issues related to a radical change of lifestyle and the support of that change.

Now, two years after the fieldwork, I have gone through all my data several times. I have also comprehended that my research question caused me to focus on how knowledge, experience, ideas and social practice were transferred from one staff member to another through meetings, dialogues and interaction in both a very reflective and a non-reflective manner – and the significance of this transfer for staff and clients alike, as revealed in the interviews. The participant observations and interviews, in combination with my participation in the two educational sessions for the coaches, deepened my understanding of the field through contextual knowledge that I could expand on in the complex interviews with informants among former and present clients. This insight helped me overcome some of the difficulties I experienced in connection with my limited possibilities for repeated interaction with informants among present and former clients.

I have also come to understand EXIT and associated matters as *a particular realm of reality*, as constituting *my field*, scattered as it is in different settings. This perspective is also an outcome of a reinterpretation of *culture* within anthropology, which has paved the way for new approaches and methodological options.

Culture in anthropological research is, in general, no longer perceived as singular separated wholes to be found ‘out there’, making the recognition of underlining cultural patterns defined within geographical borders the goal of the research. Culture is now understood as cultural knowledge, an analytical term focusing on social practices and processes. The aim is to understand how people can acquire culturally defined knowledge through a situated learning process, and how this knowledge can shape people’s frame of interpretation over time (Hasse 2002). The informants can therefore be analysed as having provided me with distinctive nuances of the field.

This approach opens the perspective in the sense that each interviewee, with their diverse viewpoints, can contribute to my understanding of the exit process with knowledge.

I have come to perceive the answers to my research questions as – to borrow a metaphor from Michael Cole (Cole 1996:135 in Hasse 2011:17) – a rope, composed of many individual but intertwined fibres. I have brought together pieces of understanding that I reached through informal conversations, the reading of autobiographies and participant observation, combined with interviews with employees, coaches and clients, the transcriptions of the interviews

and participation in staff training courses. These activities all provided pieces of information about what became – over time – my specific field of research.

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# Article 3: 'How Extremist Experiences become Valuable Knowledge in EXIT Programmes'

This article is published in Danish in the journal Social Kritik, Tidsskrift for Social Analyse & Debat no. 142, 2015: 'Tidligere ekstremisters erfaring som nyttig viden - at løsrive sig fra en ekstremistisk gruppe er en kompliceret affære'. A slightly altered version is published in English in Journal for Deradicalisation Summer/15, nr. 3

<http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/18> (25.07.2015)

## **Abstract:**

Inspired by a neo-Vygotskian approach, the article analyses how former neo-Nazis, together with other staff at Fryshuset, a youth centre in Stockholm, Sweden, have developed the organisation EXIT, which helps people to leave the extremist right. The article describes the processes former neo-Nazis must go through to alter their identity and self-understanding in order to become coaches/mentors capable of supporting others. In this connection, the article also illuminates EXIT's practice for supporting their clients. The main reason for personal change, the article stresses, is that an individual's engagement in a social practice alters his/her basis for reflection, allowing an alternative sense of identity to emerge. The reformulation of the individual's past involved in this process, the article argues, is a requirement for their extremist experiences to become useable knowledge in an organisation like EXIT aimed at helping others leave what they have come to view as a destructive and anti-democratic lifestyle.

**Keywords:** deradicalisation, social practice, transformational identity processes, from right-wing extremists to democratic citizens, cultural-historical theory.

## 'How Extremist Experiences become Valuable Knowledge in EXIT Programmes'

*It's difficult to change our thought patterns. Nobody questions that it's hard to stop smoking or lose weight. If you want to stop smoking, you can call and get help, or if you get divorced, there is an understanding that it is hard and it takes time. But when it comes to stopping these things, stopping participating in the White Power Movement or a criminal gang, then it's like society believes that you just stop and that's that. Like it's just something bad you've been up to. People just don't realise how big a change it is. You may have to cut your contact with everybody that you have ever known, and even though it has been in a bad context, they're probably your friends; you had something at least, a sort of friend who knew your name. You must leave everything, and then what's left of you? You don't really have an identity, you are exposed and so of course it takes time to change' (field note of a conversation with a social counsellor at EXIT 2012).*

**<sup>70</sup>We develop our identity in a context, which, as the quote indicates, is one of the reasons why it can be so demanding to leave an extremist group. As a response to the challenges involved in such a process, former neo-Nazis started in 1998 what has become EXIT, a Swedish organisation helping others leave the extremist right. On the basis of their deviant experiences, they have developed a practice in which former neo-Nazis become coaches – mentors - supporting other right-wing extremists struggling to leave the White Power Movement. The coaches' work at EXIT is aimed at reinforcing other (former) neo-Nazis in their decision to leave the movement and at helping them alter their self-understanding and reintegrate into society. Yet what processes help former neo-Nazis alter their identity and become coaches? And why is a well-developed social and self-understanding a prerequisite for former right-wing extremists to turn their experiences into valuable knowledge that can be used to support others in the process of leaving the extremist right wing?**

**The main reason for a personal change, as stated in the article, is that an individual's engagement in a social practice alters his/her basis for reflection and reshapes his/her world view, thereby allowing an alterna-**

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<sup>70</sup> This article is a result of a PhD project I am currently working on (2011-2014) at the Department of Psychology and Educational Studies at Roskilde University in Denmark. I carried out two months of fieldwork at EXIT in Fryhuset in 2012 and conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with staff as well as former and present clients. I spoke English, whereas informants could choose if he/she wanted to speak English or Swedish as I understand both languages.

**tive sense of self-understanding and identity to emerge. The reformulation of the individual's past involved in this process, the article argues, is a requirement for their extremist experiences to become useable knowledge in an organisation like EXIT.**

Fryshuset (The Cold Store) is the name of a certain type of youth centre in Sweden, which is based on a vision of how to empower (marginalised) youngsters.

Fryshuset is based in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö and together, the three centres offer 50 different projects, sports and cultural facilities. EXIT, an organisation supporting individuals leaving the extremist right, is one of the many social projects, NGOs and organisations linked together at Fryshuset in Stockholm and to its model for empowering young people. EXIT's model for working with former right-wing extremists is linked to Fryshuset's vision; therefore, I will start the article by introducing the centre and its specific frame of reality. I argue that the experience the staff members of Fryshuset have gained from inviting (marginalised) youths to participate in the centre's activities, rather than excluding them, has provided the knowledge base for the establishment of EXIT.

Using this argument as my point of departure, I aim to show how EXIT has developed from Fryshuset and the cultural knowledge anchored there. Today, EXIT's model for assisting what they describe as their *clients* – people in the process of leaving the extreme right – is to connect each of them to a *coach* – an employee with a past in the extremist right (Christensen 2014 A, 2014). Next, I detail how the practice of EXIT has evolved to be able to support motivated clients in a further development of their social understanding and skills, helping them leave the White Power Movement, socially and mentally. Few of EXIT's clients become coaches, but for those who do, their participation in EXIT's daily practice, I argue, make them internalise the position as coach and establish a convergent identity. To conclude, I argue that former right-wing extremists must reinterpret their narrative of participation in the extremist right and self-understanding for their experiences to become useful knowledge in organisations supporting clients leaving an extremist group. First, I will introduce the theoretical perspective on which the article is based.

## Identity – the outcome of history-in-person and participation in a current social practice

The epistemological starting point of the article, anchored in social practice theory, is ‘that our identity is formed through engagement in socially produced and culturally constructed collective activities’ (Holland et al. 1998). Identity is a concept that figuratively combines the personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations, which constitute the resources people use in their identity formation process.

Our present position is linked to our past in infinitive ways as one’s history-in-person is the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject position afforded one in the present. As there are no rules that direct our behaviour in specific social situations, improvisations are the impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as *habitus*, meets with a particular combination of circumstances for which we have no set response (ibid. 17-18). Such improvisations, from a cultural base and in response to the subject position offered in situ, are, when taken up as symbols, potential beginnings of an altered subjectivity and identity (ibid. 18).

Improvisation becomes the basis for a reformed subjectivity as identity formation moves through improvisation, conflict, embodiment and dialogue in social and historical times or *figured worlds*.

Building on Vygotsky and his conceptualisation of the process of ‘semiotic mediation’, Holland et al. (1998) have devised a theory by which developing voluntary control over behaviour by mediating cultural devices allows humans to escape enslavement to the stimuli they happen to encounter. They do so through the active construction and use of symbols. As humans can modify the stimulus value of the environment to their own mental states (ibid. 35), possible mediating devices emerge. A typical mediating device is constructed by assigning meaning to an object or behaviour. Mediating devices develop within a locus of social activity – a place in the social world – which identifies and organises them, at first in the development of a mediated complex of thought and feeling. Mediating devices may be tangible and used voluntarily and consciously: a word said to oneself to encourage oneself to act, or a chart that one consults to know what to do next in a work routine. Repeated experience with the tangible device may eventually become unnecessary, and its function may become embodied. This vision emphasises that identities are improvised in the flow of activity within specific social situations from the cul-

tural resources at hand that situate identity in collectively formed activities or what is called *figured worlds* (ibid. 40).

Figured worlds are historical phenomena to which we are recruited or into which we enter and which develop through our participation. A figured world is:

‘a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts and particular outcomes are valued over others.’ (Holland et al 1998:52).

Figured worlds rely upon artefacts as mediators in human action, as ‘psychological tools’. They are the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned and made, socially and personally. Hence they assume both a material and an ideal or conceptual aspect, an intentionality whose substance is embedded in the figured world of their use.

Therefore behaviour in this text is regarded as a sign of a self in practice and not as a sign of a self in essence (ibid. 29). The identities we gain within figured worlds are thus specific historical developments, which have emerged through continued participation in the positions defined by the social organisation of activity in those worlds (ibid. 41-42). They are characteristics of humans and societies.

The concept of figured worlds thus provides a means to conceptualise subjectivities, consciousness and agency, persons (and collective agents) as they are formed in practice. It also provides the terms for answering the conundrum of personal agency (ibid. 41-42).

Fryshuset is a place in the social world that has come into existence through certain people’s activities. Fryshuset is characterised by a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others (ibid. 52). Therefore, I argue that people engaged in Fryshuset also become part of Fryshuset’s figured world, as the centre is perceived through a particular frame of interpretation among staff and others involved in the centre.

Through participation and an emotional attachment to the figured world of Fryshuset, the client-coaches come to envision a new world of human relations, find a stance that has not previously been open to them in their daily lives and develop a different perspective on themselves and their lives. They achieve their standpoint only by submitting themselves to another set of cultural forms that have their own peculiar limitations and constraints (ibid. 64-65).

This is the theoretical foundation of this article, which leads us to an introduction of Fryshuset and its figured world, encompassing the cultural resources and personal experiences that form the basis of what has come to constitute EXIT's practice.

## Fryshuset: a particular culturally defined space

Fryshuset was founded in Stockholm in the autumn of 1984 in a large and abandoned cold-storage warehouse on the outskirts of Stockholm; hence the name. In cooperation with the YMCA, Anders Carlberg (1943-2013), a debater active on the political left<sup>71</sup>, acquired the building to convert it into an indoor basketball court for children and young people in Southern Stockholm. A rock music enthusiast among the construction workers persuaded the association to build some rehearsal rooms.

In September 1984, the doors opened to Fryshuset (Stockholm), with a newly built basketball court and 50 music rehearsal rooms. From the outset, the young people themselves helped shape the house. Basketball and rock music dominated Fryshuset in the early years, but social engagement, education and other activities grew.

Today, Fryshuset in Stockholm is placed in a 24,000 square metre building, employs 500 people and receives 40,000 visitors a month<sup>72</sup>. Fryshuset has, as mentioned in the introduction, become a concept for working with marginalised youths, and similar centres have been established in Malmö and Gothenburg.

One of Carlberg's motivations for establishing what has developed into a concept for Fryshuset was his perception of youngsters being left to themselves as he believed that communication across generations had ceased, leaving young people with few role models and grown-ups to guide them. Therefore, his vision for today's Fryshuset was to create a place where youngsters could interact with grown-ups in a positive way (Carlberg 2008). His overall goal was for it to be a place in which marginalised individuals would be mobilised and come to realise that negative experiences can be turned into positive strengths (Carlberg 2008:80). As he pointed out in writings and lectures, *encouragement*, *confidence* and *responsibility* are crucial values for young people to experience so

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<sup>71</sup> [http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anders\\_Carlberg](http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anders_Carlberg), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anders\\_Carlberg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anders_Carlberg)

<sup>72</sup> It is a foundation headed by the YMCA of Stockholm. Public funding covers around five per cent of the activities; the rest is financed by a mixture of grants, endowments and fees for services such as educational and social programmes <http://fryshuset.se/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Årsredovisning-2013-Stiftelsen-KFUM-Söder-Fryshuset-påskriften-inkl-revisionsberättelse.pdf>



they can develop self-esteem and become responsible adults (ibid.). Therefore, Fryshuset is an association of a multitude of different projects working to promote empowerment and tolerance by building social relations and interaction.

These thoughts come alive through youngsters' participation in different cultural and sporting activities, as staff members at the centre are convinced that being physically active is fun and makes it easier to relax, concentrate and learn. Social projects at Fryshuset include, for example, working to build relationships between boys and adults through activities and dialogue, focusing on including young single parents in a network and integrating young lone refugees in social networks. In addition, there are opportunities to play basketball, participate in a skateboard team and engage in projects focusing on making innovative ideas within culture and events happen, to mention just a few of the many projects at Fryshuset.

When you enter Fryshuset, you enter a particular culturally defined space (Hasse 2002) as the centre operates on the basis of specific values, which are promoted in information material, illustrations on the walls and the activities. Both Fryshuset's mission and how people involved in Fryshuset react to it are expressed in statements on the centre's webpage<sup>73</sup>: *'We provide encouragement, confidence and responsibility, which creates knowledge and self-esteem that highlights the individual's inherent power', 'We listen to what is happening in society and act immediately. We are not afraid of what is new and unknown'. 'We see opportunities and mobilise forces where others see problems'. 'We test our way, correct and constantly improve our techniques and We start from the individual's needs. Here, the door is always open for those who want to get involved and develop, whatever their background'. 'We believe in respectful meetings where the desire to participate and the common interests of all overcome contradictions, differences and increase understanding'* (author's translation). These statements become mediating artefacts for staff as they come to evoke the figured world of Fryshuset by constituting its vision and raison d'être as well as framing the centre's work. Staff members participating in the centre's activities over time, the statements become their personal points of references, which they used in interviews when I asked them to tell me about their work at Fryshuset. They also point out the values according to which staff members at the centre are expected to act.

At Fryshuset, *exclusion* and *passion* also have special significance as these terms explain why youngsters develop in a positive or a negative way. Fryshuset's webpage states<sup>74</sup> that *'young people can change the world through their passions'* (au-

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<sup>73</sup> <http://fryshuset.se/om-fryshuset/vision-och-vardegrund/>

<sup>74</sup> <http://fryshuset.se/om-fryshuset/vision-och-vardegrund/>

thor's translation). Passion is obviously perceived as a strong energy, which, as the vision to which these words are connected implies, can be used in a negative or a positive way. Passion, as the director of Fryshuset explained at a conference in 2011, can: '*make you an innovative entrepreneur, but it can also be the driving force in establishing a gang or an extremist political group*'.

Passion becomes a negative driving force when an individual is or feels *excluded*. According to this vision, exclusion makes a person feel vulnerable. These notions of passion and exclusion as well as the above-mentioned statements about Fryshuset's values become *mediating artefacts* - collectively developed and individually learned and made social and personal – evoking what I have come to term the figured world of Fryshuset.

They inform the staff's discourse and practice as staff through their engagement in the centre's practice come to assign significance to the explanation carried in the words (Holland et al. 1998). The staff's discourse seems to draw on specific sets of interpretations and assumptions present in this chain of causation: you will tend to engage *passionately* in extremist groups and/or gangs when you feel *excluded* and are unfortunate enough to grow up in areas where the *general conditions* make an extremist group a *possible* choice for your engagement. When *passion* and *exclusion* are framed as leading you in a negative or positive direction, it becomes evident which actions the staff at Fryshuset value over others, as by offering youngsters positive role models and hobbies in which they can engage *passionately*, they can prevent the youngsters from feeling excluded. The vision for Fryshuset's work, combined with the notion of exclusion linked to a double-sided interpretation of passion, together set the frame for Fryshuset as a figured world and as a particular culturally defined space.

At Fryshuset, the idea is that if you are passionate about something, the passion will motivate you to become engaged in an activity. Therefore, it is important for you to discover your passions by trying out different things. By offering a multitude of different activities, Fryshuset creates opportunities for individuals to become passionate about an activity, which may keep up their personal motivation for being engaged in the activity and community as a means to learn and develop.

Fryshuset's stated values of being '*open to all*' and '*acting on what is happening in society*' as well as '*not being afraid of what is new and unknown*' have led to several controversial decisions. A decision in the 1980s especially caused problems, when it was decided that Fryshuset should establish a house for skinheads on the property. The goal was to move these youngsters – some of whom were involved in the extreme right – physically closer to break their isolation. The

situation resulted in a great deal of negative controversy at Fryshuset and in the media; critics argued that it had contributed to the expansion of the extremist right, and that leading figures in the group would receive regular subsidies from municipal grants.<sup>75</sup> But the decision also made Fryshuset a place that youth defecting from the extreme right could turn to, laying the foundation for EXIT.

The staff at Fryshuset already had experience in creating new projects by drawing on their own personal experience and knowledge of the causes of problems and including individuals in need of support to improvise solutions. This method is today an established practice at Fryshuset and is stated in its explicit values.

In relation to one of EXIT's present clients another controversy arose. The client is both a lifetime prisoner for murder and a painter. Fryshuset chose to exhibit his paintings and have him visit when he was out on probation. These decisions and the fact that he is a client at EXIT have created conflict among the staff from other projects at Fryshuset as some of the staff did not agree with any of the decisions made in relation to him. Some mistook the support for him by EXIT and its coaches as a sign of acceptance of his criminal act. The conflict led the leader of Fryshuset to run workshops where staff could discuss Fryshuset's values and how to act upon them, as they obviously perceived them in different ways.

This emphasises that stated values do not function as fixed instructions for behaviour that people can just follow; to gain collective significance, they need to become symbolic devices through people's action and engagement. The outcome in this case was that the staff accepted that EXIT, as part of Fryshuset, would and should support motivated clients – irrespective of the seriousness of the crime they have committed – towards a non-criminal life. The assessment of clients according to the seriousness of their crime would make Fryshuset's explicit statement of openness and tolerance for all kinds of people cease to be meaningful.

Disagreements like these are inevitable as the staff members at Fryshuset have different backgrounds that make them judge situations in many different ways, as people perceive things as they relate to their position (Hasse 2002).

Yet disagreements often create opportunities for people to acquire a deeper understanding of each other's points of view. Fryshuset strives to overcome these differences, which carry with them the seeds of conflict, through continuous discussion among staff of current issues. These situations allow staff

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<sup>75</sup> <http://arbetaren.se/artiklar/fryshuset-en-skattefinansierad-nazilokal/>  
[http://expo.se/2003/kommunala-bidrag-finansierade-vam\\_262.html](http://expo.se/2003/kommunala-bidrag-finansierade-vam_262.html)

to introduce different perspectives, which can alter established routines and notions and potentially transform them (Holland and Skinner 1997). Conflicts can transform staff members' understanding of a situation as they gain insight into how the world appears when perceived from different positions. Such discussions also tend to homogenise the different participants' frame of interpretation as some views may be expected to be more readily acknowledged than others as the different standpoints tend to be presented and judged against Fryshuset's stated values of *'believing in respectful meetings where the desire to participate and the common interests of all overcome contradictions, differences and increase understanding'* (author's translation). The stated values can be points of reference for staff, which in subtle ways may constrain their behaviour. Fryshuset has over time developed a social practice situated in a figured world, a culturally defined realm of reality, which has laid the foundation for the work of EXIT. Fryshuset also provides a basis for the identity formation of some of EXIT's clients as they, in addition to getting support during the process of leaving the White Power Movement, may have the option of acquiring a new position through the possibilities offered in Fryshuset and by becoming coaches at EXIT, as I shall discuss below.

## EXIT - a practice formed through joint efforts

EXIT was started by Kent Lindal, a former neo-Nazi, in 1998. Other programmes helping former neo-Nazis disengage were also established in Norway, Sweden and Germany during the 1990s (Bjørge 2009, footnote<sup>76</sup>). The inspiration for the Swedish organisation came from the Norwegian EXIT project initiated by Professor Tore Bjørge from the Norwegian Police University College (2009). Bjørge's approach to people involved in the extreme right wing in Scandinavia is that subjects do not necessarily join such groups because they hold extremist views; they often *acquire* extremist views because they have joined the groups for other reasons (2009). This standpoint was adopted by EXIT Sweden and still lays the ground for EXIT's approach to clients. The approach, which links the individual to his/her conditions is also in line with Fryshuset's notion of exclusion.

The former neo-Nazis who were involved in EXIT in the beginning had experienced the struggle with what seem to be common factors in a disengagement process, including threats from former friends, feelings of loneliness, aggres-

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<sup>76</sup> [http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/are-you-looking-to-break-away-from-your-nazi-gang-exit-deutschland-bernd-wagner](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/are-you-looking-to-break-away-from-your-nazi-gang-exit-deutschland-bernd-wagner)

sion, violent reaction patterns, distrust of people and a lack of job opportunities (Bjørge 2009 and footnote <sup>77</sup>, Christensen 2014 A).

The start of EXIT was conflict-ridden as the people involved had immense problems handling the organisation and did not know how to deal with the social systems and the police, with whom they had a strained relationship after years in the White Power Movement.

As EXIT needed help to develop its program, Ingrid, a very experienced social worker, was recruited in 2002 through Anders Carlberg's personal network. When Carlberg asked her whether she would help, her first reaction was that she did not have any experience with such work and did not, as she said, in any way *'want to work with those Nazi guys that you read about in the paper'*. In line with the explicit values of Fryshuset, Carlberg questioned her perception of the problem and her view on humans in general, to make her think about whether *'she thought that some people were more entitled to support than others'*. Questions like this made her reconsider and finally agree to start.

This way of engaging people in a project at Fryshuset is also a very characteristic example of how the organisation evolves through staff members' reactions to a problem which change over time, and how the staff expands through networks and new interests and staff members connect with one another as they fulfil the tasks involved in creating solutions.

Ingrid entered a work climate where she, as she describes it, *'was regarded as a sick bitch by strong guys who, to end a quarrel, would throw things at each other across the room'*. Looking back, she describes the guys she met then, with some of whom she is still working, as *'a bunch of guys with good hearts, but with their own experiences to deal with; major problems with social relations and in their lives in general. They had 'landed' here and they had not got any help to rehabilitate or reflect. Fryshuset had employed them, and they had managed part of the way, and then they were supposed to meet people here (Fryshuset)'* (interview transcript 2012).

Ingrid has, as the quote indicates, changed her perception of the people with whom she works. She no longer perceives them as *'Nazi guys'*, but has come to see them as *'a bunch of good guys'* with social and relational problems. Ingrid's change of perception of what have become her colleagues after having worked at Fryshuset for many years may indicate how she has integrated the perception of the figured world of Fryshuset: social problems lead youngsters to participate in the extremist right.

From the very beginning, Ingrid pointed to reflection and rehabilitation as a way of supporting individuals in leaving the extremist right. She introduced an

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<sup>77</sup> [http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/are-you-looking-to-break-away-from-your-nazi-gang-exit-deutschland-bernd-wagner](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/are-you-looking-to-break-away-from-your-nazi-gang-exit-deutschland-bernd-wagner)

approach that combined her experience from therapeutic social work and knowledge of the system with the young guys' experience and knowledge of the extremist right wing. This cooperation made both Ingrid and the coaches 'in the becoming' become aware of crucial issues in the exit process. By working with Ingrid, the very first coaches came to realise that they needed support to be able to alter their reactions, behaviour and thought patterns.

The Nazi movement is described by several of the coaches at EXIT as a political sect, in which members are schooled in black and white thinking, notions of a conspiracy against society, and that all outside the group are enemies to be fought. Belonging to these groups can create social disability in the form of difficulty in resolving conflicts and managing stress, and former participants often need to process the ideas in which they have been immersed for a long period of time (Lodenious 2014).

The staff's awareness of these problems condition EXIT's practice as efforts are made to help former extremists become reflective about their often unreflective reaction and thought patterns.

Ingrid's cooperation with the coaches was very demanding as a practice had to take form for EXIT to survive. A process Ingrid describes as follows: *'We proceeded methodically and found a starting point. We established contacts with the police, and we developed the organisation while we dealt with our frustration. I took care of staff members' frustration; someone attempted suicide...the whole group was traumatised. I went to the hospital... It was like going into the eye of a storm. It was damned hard and challenging, and it tested my patience to the limit, but it was really uplifting.'*

Ingrid has on several occasions remarked how EXIT could only have been established by the combined efforts, knowledge and experiences of all staff members. She recounts:

*'It was awesome to see how their skills and experience and my skills could meet, which we also work on all the time, to realise how we can work together. They thought that it was me who did it all, and I was like, 'No, this is what is happening, this is me, but there - that's you'. I would never have reached the Nazi guys if I had not had their help from the start. But we built it up together and it was really demanding and later on we formalised it.'*

Thus, a method of learning by doing emerged that EXIT still uses today. Ingrid continues: *'When I had..., for example, a conversation with parents, I always had a guy with me, and they learned by doing it with me, and then we talked about it afterwards'* (interview transcript 2012).

Through collaboration with clients guided by Ingrid's and the coaches' different experiences, a practice emerged. Just by being at Fryshuset, EXIT staff members are introduced to an alternative world that allows them to imagine different ways of being. By being positioned as staff in EXIT's office, they are

subjected to a different position than the one of (former) neo-Nazis, and they are treated as if they fit the position of coaches 'in the becoming'. This acceptance is crucial for individuals in the process of altering their identity (Holland and Skinner 1997) as such a position tend to constrain their behaviour. They are unlikely, for example, to be able to throw things across the room without getting a negative reaction, and they begin to consider whether they should do so at all if they start to become interested in becoming a coach who is taken seriously at Fryshuset and EXIT.

Ingrid also helps them objectify their own behaviour by talking to them about it, making them conscious of it and thereby creating alternatives to how they can act in different situations – for example, without using violence or threats. Through their cooperation with Ingrid, they learn how to handle a conversation – in the position as coach at EXIT – with, for example, parents of youngsters involved in the extremist right who contact EXIT for advice.

Ingrid works on the basis of a situated learning concept (Lave & Wenger 1991), but she also linked the learning to internal processes of reflection and objectification.

The former extremists learn to become coaches first by participating in the situation with Ingrid and then by talking about it with her, giving her the opportunity to indicate points of reference or symbolic devices that they can use in a future somewhat similar situation. The concept is not only 'learning by doing', but also about making the coaches conscious of what they have learned, as Ingrid objectifies certain aspects of that learning and thereby makes it available for the coaches to reflect upon (Holland and Skinner 1997:198). In this way, she involves the coaches in a process that provides them with new experiences to help mediate their transformation, new tools they can use to deal with various situations and devices to think with, making it possible for them to objectify their own behaviour. In the process they gain self-esteem and develop alternative perceptions of themselves as coaches and as members of staff.

Jeff, a former neo-Nazi, describes part of the development process as follows: *'When I started working here, I asked my boss...Something happened with a client; he was going to hit a subway driver, and I managed to stop him, and a couple of security guys came along, and they pulled out their batons, and I thought, 'Shit, this is going to go ape shit'. But I managed to resolve it and to control the client. I called up my boss and said; 'Holy shit this just happened, I managed to resolve it, but what if an emergency happens, what is the checklist for emergencies?' She said, 'Whatever you think is appropriate, do that'. 'You complete asshole, just give me detailed instructions on how to resolve emergencies.' And she was like, 'No, I trust your ability to make the right decision in that situation'. And I hated*

*ber for it. But then I learned to trust my own ability to resolve issues, which until then, I was 25, I think, until 25 I didn't know how to do.* (interview transcript 2012).

As the quote illustrates, the path to becoming a coach requires the motivation to get through very demanding situations and to deal with feelings of doubt and anger – repeatedly. As the coaches are engaged in different – and new and demanding – situations, they need to improvise to solve the situation as there are no ‘detailed instructions’. Jeff improvises a response to the problem at hand on the basis of his subject position as coach. He learns to objectify the situation when he thinks about what happened and what he did, and in this way, he creates a possibility for directing his behaviour the next time a situation arises. Thus, the situation becomes one example among many, mediating a transformation of self-understanding to the extent that Jeff today points out not only why he hated Ingrid for it, but also why and how the situation made him learn. He now uses the method with his clients.

Ingrid helps new coaches continuously create points of significance by making them experience concrete examples of how to handle a situation and by talking about it afterwards. These steps make specific situations become symbolic devices - a tool for them to think and act with – to solve the next situation. They can use this experience in a different social situation, requiring a different sort of behaviour than the one they have been accustomed to in the extremist right.

In Jeff's case, the situation also made him realise that *he could trust himself* to make the right decision because of Ingrid's confidence in him. Jeff's identity and subjectivity develop as he improvises in new situations, but there are some constraints: Jeff is trusted not to react as he used to, which might have involved simply following instructions, threatening the client or hitting him. The situation makes him angry and creates resistance as he feels insecure and does not know what to do. His dialogue with Ingrid encourages reflection, which over time and through repeated experience will make Jeff embody the new way of perceiving and dealing with situations like this. By applying these new ways of acting in his own life, he embodies them and they become his personal knowledge (Holland et al. 1998).

How interactions with Ingrid and the cultural knowledge that constitutes Fryshuset as a figured world become personal knowledge that frames staff members' interpretation of their surroundings is also evident in this quote from an interview with Joachim, a former neo-Nazi and now a coach at EX-IT. The quote shows how Joachim has come to personalise Fryshuset's explanation of exclusion in the process of leaving the extremist right wing and later on through his work as a coach. Fryshuset's perception of exclusion, rather



than a personal characteristic, as one of the core reasons for youth involvement in extremist groups seems to be one of the symbolic devices that have altered Joachim's self-perception and informed his understanding of the reasons for the difficulties some young people encounter and how refocusing can empower individuals. During an interview with Joachim, I asked: *'I have noticed that you talk about utanförskab – exclusion - what does that mean? Is it like a concept that you are working with?'* Joachim answered: *'Exclusion - the feeling of exclusion. Sometimes it can be a real situation, but it can also be a feeling of being excluded. Modern society is moving forward very quickly, and you have to be good at all these things to succeed. If you aren't, you have the feeling that you aren't part of society, or that you aren't welcome. We work a lot on that to kind of refocus; 'So okay, you feel that society let you down! But look at all of these things; these are things that society actually provides for you, too'. He continued: 'You can take control of the situation, and you can go back to school, you can do it'. It is a shift in agency for the person; 'You can also do something about this yourself. But putting it in a very...you know, I would not use these kinds of words. But I would work on motivating people to rethink their situations. A lot of them have had bad school experiences, being bullied or robbed or... having all these experiences that have destroyed their self-esteem, I would have to kind of support them in regaining that; 'You can do it', 'It is possible, you have choices'* (interview transcript 2012).

Through the episodes described above, Jeff, Joachim and the other coaches in a disengagement process are put in the position of a trusted and skilled employee, in which they learn by doing and thereby develop skills and self-confidence. Jeff's example is illustrative of many of the situations that arise in the process former right-wingers go through on their way to becoming coaches at EXIT. This practice also introduces them to very different values and a democratic way of interaction, involving trust, negotiation and communication, as the quote from Joachim illustrates.

This is in sharp contrast to the extremist right, with its hierarchical organisation and religiously organised world view, in which some actions are acceptable while others are taboo (Bjørge 1997, Fangen 2001, Eiternes & Fangen 2002, Christensen 2014). By participating in EXIT and being part of Fryshuset, staff members (trans)form their basis for reflection and perception of the world. As they integrate into Fryshuset's figured world, they alter their self-perception as Jeff and Joachim have done, who are today highly talented coaches at EXIT, using their own experience, combined with EXIT's approaches of helping others.

EXIT is now a well-established organisation, with growing numbers of staff members, who work according to an established practice. Yet what is EXIT's formalised practice today? And how are people who have the propensity to be

drawn to the organisation formed in the figured world of Fryshuset at EXIT?  
I will discuss these themes below.

## EXIT's client support - and the ideas behind it

Out of the very first instances of cooperation between Ingrid and the former neo-Nazis who contributed to starting EXIT, a practice took shape, which has been professionalised today. EXIT has employed two social counsellors, who are officially in charge of the client programme, several academics and a human resources employee. The employees have different professional competences, but common to them all is openness towards others and personal references of individuals taking action and overcoming personal challenges such as drug abuse and difficult family relations.

Client support is still linked to the coaches' personal processes, combined with further experience in working with clients, which has proven that a client's motivation in combination with personal relations to the coach and the support of the coach are all-important factors in the client's further development. This is why EXIT's work first and foremost aims at helping clients maintain their motivation for change, as altering one's lifestyle to the extent required in these cases is often an extremely demanding task.

Coaches at EXIT involve clients in different activities, such as visits to museums, weightlifting, walking and talking, informal café meetings and paintball. The aim is to inspire clients to engage in alternative activities and potentially to identify new activities to be (passionately) interested in (Christensen 2014, Lodenious 2014). The strategy reflects EXIT's approach to personal change, which is based on the conviction that engaging in a variety of activities repeatedly gives individuals a wide range of experiences and emotions that create new connections in the brain, which, as Ingrid and the coaches explain, is a precondition for people to be able to start (re)acting in new ways.

EXIT is now formally defined as a self-help programme with specific functions associated with client support, including various forms of therapy sessions and safe houses to escape potential harassment from the movement. The coaches at EXIT have experienced through their own stories that clients are often misinformed about society and unaware of their basic rights, which is why they have immense difficulties approaching public institutions when they disengage.

They may struggle with not becoming aggressive and using threats when they deal with formal institutions, as they are often unaware of alternative ways of getting an answer or a result. Therefore, EXIT also provides social support to

facilitate individuals' (re)integration into society by helping them in their contact with authorities and by encouraging them to reestablish contact with their families.

The organisation also provides consultative support to institutions working to prevent radicalisation of youngsters<sup>78</sup> and now has a worldwide network of people working against radicalisation and extremism.

EXIT has grown out of Fryshuset's practice of building organisations by pooling motivated people with employees with various professional and personal competences. The success of the experience has led the staff to extend their work to include clients trying to leave highly organised street and motorcycle gangs, such as Black Cobra and Hell's Angels. These clients need much the same support as former right-wing extremists. As a result, Passus, a sister organisation, has grown out of EXIT's practice and works according to the same methods and assumptions, but is aimed at gang members (Christensen 2014). As Ingrid explains:

*'Exit received an inquiry from a prison under great bush-bush. It was a gang leader who wanted to defect, and we had to consider whether we could work with him. There were people here from the prison's security department, and I already had a couple of guys from the biker world whom I had taken into EXIT, even though they did not belong there. We had three of these guys, so I thought we could make a pilot project out of it and see where it led us. For we knew all along that, with this method, we could meet all types of people from different groups and gangs, and there were indicators suggesting that it would work, and then came the structure, and then we did the same thing with this organisation for defectors from gangs'* (interview transcript 2012).

Coaches from EXIT and Passus are now part of a joint team, physically placed in the same office. As part of the practice of working with clients, the staff of both Passus and EXIT draw a line between people's actions and them as human beings, for, as several employees have explained: *'We condemn the action, but never the human being'*. As Joachim points out: *'How can I help someone if I start by dehumanising him or her by condemning the whole person because of his or her actions?'* The view that a person is a human being, no matter what crimes he/she has committed is in contrast with the commonly expressed notion that evil acts make humans become monsters – they dehumanise them – which erases evil as an integrated part of the human experience.

The view held by EXIT and Passus enables people who have committed violent acts to move on with their life. As one coach said to his client of many years: *'You can never bring people back to life, but you have done the second-best thing:*

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<sup>78</sup> [http://www.ungdomsstyrelsen.se/sites/default/files/publikationer\\_uploads/utvardering-av-exit.pdf](http://www.ungdomsstyrelsen.se/sites/default/files/publikationer_uploads/utvardering-av-exit.pdf)

*acknowledged your crimes'*, in this case, murder. An opening is thus created for a possible life after extreme violence, although the guilt, as became obvious in interviews with clients, remains a never-ending issue to deal with. The founder of EXIT, Kent Lindahl (2000), for example, writes in his autobiography how he continued to struggle with the violent acts he had committed years after he had stopped being a right-wing extremist.

Identity and the way we perceive ourselves is, in EXIT and Fryshuset's frame of interpretation, contextual and historical, a *process* rather than a *character* or *personality trait*, which is a fixed and unchangeable entity. Who we are is seen as a result of what we do, rather than something we are. From that follows that identity is viewed as an ongoing and open-ended process, formed in the process of participating in activities specific to figured worlds (Holland et al. 1998).

## Becoming an agent at EXIT

The figured world of Fryshuset emphasises how the significant interrelation of exclusion, passion, inclusion and empowerment described above is – to varying degrees – acquired by EXIT's members of staff as they participate in the community of practice at EXIT and Fryshuset. By participating in activities at Fryshuset, the employees learn to reproduce and enact cultural forms particular to this world – for example, the way terms like *identity*, *exclusion* and *condition* are used in the daily communication at EXIT. Staff members take up these devices for mediating what over time becomes their own conception of issues involved in this particular world. One employee, Karin, describes what she calls her personal journey of development from her first involvement in EXIT as a trainee social worker to becoming a member of staff.

Karin feels that working for EXIT has changed her and her perspective to a great extent: *'It was a VERY, VERY transformative journey to do my internship here. My judgments and human perspective were questioned, and I was forced to think: "Who am I to judge?" or: "How do I judge?" and: "Who am I to meet these people [neo-Nazis] in this way?" I gained a completely different understanding of it here, which made me see the individual behind a person's actions and get to understand that the individual is not ... just because you have committed an evil act, it doesn't mean that you by definition are bad for life. ... It is so easy to believe that you are open-minded because you fight for the weaker ones in society... But then when you come here, you see a totally different kind of exclusion.'* Karin experienced, for example, how difficult it can be for clients to overcome society's stigmatisation of them as former extremists. *'It was a very, very positive – and as I said – quite scary journey. A lot happens along the way at a personal level during*

*your time here. ... Really to realise that it is not always the individual who is ... that it's social conduct that is shaped by our surroundings and circumstances, and what happens around you of course, in combination with internal disposition and so on. But precisely, we are all products of our conditions in a way.'* (Interview transcript 2012)

Karin came to perceive herself in a different way as she realised how she had been judging neo-Nazis herself. Through her work at EXIT, she began to understand that there could be an alternative explanation as to why people joined extremist groups, which made her question her own reasons for judging these people. By engaging ourselves in a figured world, we form and become formed when we make the symbolic meaning of the devices of the figured world our personal knowledge. These devices can be things, people, words or, as in this case, a specific perspective on people (Holland et al. 1998). Yet, as will become evident, some people incorporate an identity and self-understanding as an agent in EXIT's figured world to a much greater extent than others. Karin has acquired an EXIT perspective – the separation of the human being and his/her actions and the identity formation in relation to a context – through her engagement. Over time she has come to identify herself with the organisation, where she has been introduced to this frame of interpretation in different ways – through dialogue, meetings, work with clients – and it has come to constitute her perspective of not only the clients, but also people in general, including herself.

As the example above illustrates, staff at EXIT come to perceive the world in a rather similar fashion, in part because perspectives tend to become coordinated as some views and actions are encouraged and others are discouraged through subtle signs, making individuals refrain from repeating them (Hasse 2002).

Some of the employees have newly arrived; they come with different professional experiences and perspectives, not only on client cases – which is encouraged – but also on the established practice surrounding the work with clients. They will reflect on explicit rules, practices as well as implicit taken-for-granted ways of doing things (Hasse 2002:201). Karin's quote illustrates how some staff members come to identify strongly with Fryshuset and EXIT, whereas others will never come to identify with the figured world of Fryshuset – or at least not enough to interpret the issues at stake at EXIT by drawing on the cultural knowledge that brought Fryshuset into existence.

Many of the former and present clients I have interviewed have expressed a feeling of gratitude and a desire to give something in return to EXIT and their coach, who they feel has made it possible for them to change their lives. Therefore, many current clients wish to become coaches. This ambition can

also be a result of 'the coach' being one of the first examples of a job function they encounter as they disengage. Also, it is one of very few jobs in which they can actually use what they have learned in the extremist environment. Yet very few former clients actually do become coaches.

Since EXIT became an established NGO, new coaches are recruited from former clients and they learn through cooperation with experienced ones (Christensen 2014A, 2014B, 2014 in press). This description from a meeting illustrates that the learning period is yet another transitional period for the coach in the becoming: *'Erik, a former client who has worked as a coach for a year, points out that the staff members at EXIT are the only ones in Europe spending so much time on a single client. What do we do if a coach gets sick?' He asks. Ingrid answers by emphasising that he, Erik, has to learn how to do the work from more experienced coaches. Joachim and Jeff (two of the first coaches at EXIT) learned in the beginning how to work with clients in this way. She continued: 'Two client-coaches cannot learn from each other,' she said, 'and you also need to deal with the emotional side of what is going on inside yourself in the process'* (filed note 2012).

Coaches thus learn 'how to be coaches' by cooperating with experienced coaches – in the same way as Ingrid worked with Jeff as described above – but the coach in the becoming also needs to handle his emotions. For the new coach, the learning process is thus social in that, through interaction with the experienced coach (and other staff), he learns how to handle clients, but he also learns to enact cultural forms particular to Fryshuset and EXIT and to take up these forms as devices for mediating his own conception of himself and the world around him.

This is a transitional period in which some, but not all, coaches attach themselves emotionally to the position of coach, which over time will make them embody the interpretation of events and experiences and the appropriate behaviour and values of a coach at EXIT and Fryshuset. This is a step on the way to becoming a coach. Yet what needs to happen for a coach in the becoming to actually become a coach? What is the learning model? I will discuss these questions in more detail in the next paragraph.

## Being a client - becoming a coach - supporting a client

The current coaches at EXIT are characterised by a high level of energy and a devotion to their position as members of staff at EXIT and/or Passus. This enthusiasm also seems to have helped them attain a status in the extremist

right or highly organised criminal gangs of which they have been part prior to joining EXIT and/or Passus.

Clients who become coaches are required to do something between the two positions as a way of preventing them from relapsing into old patterns of behaviour because of the job and making it less painful for them to handle the clients' problems.

One client-coach at EXIT mentioned that it remains a daily struggle to adhere to a non-criminal path in life; however, the coaches who had been there for up to ten years never mentioned this struggle. Between two of my periods of fieldwork two coaches were dismissed, as EXIT found out that they had hardly met their clients and that they had exploited them, rather than helped them. This situation highlights the fact that even though people are at EXIT and Fryshuset, they do not necessarily invest any emotion in and attach themselves to EXIT or their position as coach. Most individuals engage to varying degrees in, and identify themselves with, the position open to them, while a few never do, as in the above-mentioned case (Hasse 2002:206, Holland et al.1998).

According to the person responsible for human resources, when a client becomes a coach, he can be hired in a wage-subsidized job, where the employer pays 20% of the wage and the social system pays the rest. Wage subsidized jobs can be held for up to five years; the maximum duration is given to people suffering from illness or who have had major personal problems such as crime and drug abuse. The wage subsidy is considered a transitional benefit that can help these people return to the labour market. Over time, the subsidy is reduced so that the employer pays an increasing percentage of the wage and finally the full wage. This model gives people who have been out of the labour market for some time the opportunity to, for example, learn to take responsibility, to arrive at work on time and to develop a work identity.

It also makes it possible for client-coaches to be engaged in the learning process of becoming a coach on a flexible basis, allowing them to take days off and to work part-time if they feel that the job is becoming too demanding, as a lot of the client-coaches are still struggling with their personal problems. During my fieldwork, I participated along with several coaches in a further training course called 'Crime as a lifestyle'. The course was based on group work and reflective exercises, where we had to think how a criminal we knew would react in a specific situation (or participants could think of themselves and their own reactions if they had a criminal background). The idea was to discuss the result of the individual criminal reaction pattern, but seen from the perspective of others; in other words, which effect does a criminal act – vio-

lence or robbery, for example – have on other people and on the lives of close relatives of the criminal. After a few days I noticed that one of the new coaches was absent. I asked an employee where he was, and she explained: *'Lars felt really bad while participating in the 'Crime as a lifestyle' seminar. He thought it was very hard, and it had made him doubt whether he had distanced himself enough from his own story to be able to work as a coach, or whether he should do something else that had nothing to do with this at all'* (field note 2012).

The course introduced the client-coaches to exercises that can help individuals reflect on their own story, because according to Gunnar Bergström, the teacher, most criminals tend to avoid reflections like these on their criminal lifestyle or make excuses (Bergström 2012).

Being in a group where you are expected to speak about your reflections makes it hard to avoid thinking about and discussing your feelings. These kinds of exercises create self-consciousness and self-reflection and help the person take the standpoint of others. In this way, the client-coach/coach learns to objectify himself and, through the objectification, gains a different understanding of his behaviour – seen from the perspective of the victim – which can help guide his subsequent behaviour (Holland et al.1998).

The courses in combination with Fryshuset's frame of interpretation of the contextual reasons for youngsters participating in destructive groups, also presented at EXIT and Passus, help client-coaches understand how the context of which you are part opens up certain possibilities for you, while it closes others. It is, as coaches point out, much easier to become a criminal if there is a gang next door and your friends are involved in it than if it is not an option. Activities such as courses, meetings and the daily dialogue with other staff also make the client-coach part of an interaction during which he will be introduced to words that enable him to verbalise his thoughts. This can be demanding as it can take time to develop a vocabulary for the feelings and thoughts connected with the many aspects of changing one's identity and lifestyle. The interaction also puts the client-coach in situations where he has to take others into account, for example, by paying attention to others' feelings, listening to others and responding in an emphatic way.

During yet another stay at EXIT I was allowed to participate in a seminar that had been arranged for the staff. The idea was to discuss client work and how to handle the fact that not all clients would end up leaving the gang or extremist group for good –regardless of the coach's effort. During the course, the teacher asked one of the client-coaches: *'What would you do if a client hit you? Lars answered; 'I would hit him back and then we could take it from there'. 'Then,' the teacher said, 'you would be just like him, and you would be back to where you came from'. Another*



*client-coach said that he hoped his appearance in itself would be enough to show what the game was about. Because, as he said, 'If you hit someone, you must also be strong enough to take one back - and that should stop you from hitting'* (field note 2012).

Looks – in this case, muscles – have been created through years of weightlifting, to be able to signal: 'I'm strong, I hit hard if I have to, so think twice before you act'.

The answers reflect the logic at work in gangs and demonstrate why the exercises at the seminar were designed to make the client-coaches think about how to respond to clients, knowing their logic, but applying a different one themselves. Yet they also make them go through their reaction patterns and then evaluate them on the basis of a new standard, which stipulates that hitting back is not socially acceptable. It is even made explicit that if a client-coach does hit someone, he will no longer be perceived as having left his old (violent) lifestyle behind.

The client-coaches are in a new context: Fryshuset. They are addressed as trustworthy individuals and coaches in the becoming; people whose opinion counts. Thus each time a client-coach interacts in contexts such as seminars, teamwork, meetings and dialogues with other coaches, he gets additional tools – mediating devices – as a means to reflect, and he is afforded a position as a coach and equal. Coaches also become emotionally attached to the identity of coach when they start to care about how other staff members perceive them. Viewed over the long term, these day-to-day practices of social positions and acts of inclusion create a situation where an individual's position and identity as a coach (if he comes to identify himself with the position) co-develop and become a disposition leading to a definitive change of self-understanding and identity (Holland et al. 1998)

During the last part of my fieldwork, I participated in a three-day course on a method called 'Motivational Interviewing'. According to the teacher, *'You tend to use the style of communication that you have experienced as useful'. 'Using mockery and a condescending tone work very well in a criminal world.'* The remark made one client-coach become more aware of his own communication style, with which he was very frustrated. He said, *'I have a problem if I become passionate about something; I take over the conversation, making it hard for anybody else to speak. I am tired of being that way. But it used to work well, to be able to present things factually all the time, like, 'This is it', 'I know the facts' so 'I'm right' and therefore I have the claim to power. I am so tired of being that way, but it's really difficult not to behave that way'* (field note 2012). Such remarks underline how our disposition or habitus is inscribed in our bodies (Wilken 2007). Yet they also show how the different courses and activities in which the client-coaches participate are a means of becoming con-

scious of their embodied behaviour as well as learning the skills needed to work with clients. Courses like these help coaches identify their emotions and verbalise them, which is a very important part of objectifying yourself, making it possible to alter your actions and self-understanding.

Discussing with more experienced staff difficult aspects of specific clients' cases and the client-coaches' own emotions in relation to them is yet another means through which the client-coaches learn how to support their clients, but definitely also get tools they can use themselves (Christensen 2014). When they discuss clients, the client-coaches' vocabulary expands constantly. Being able to verbalise emotions makes it easier to understand (one's own and the client's emotions) and handle them and make it possible to communicate with others about any difficulties.

Since they were clients, the client-coaches have been going through a very intensive period of self-development, perceived through the frame of interpretation at EXIT, in which they have learned more about themselves, their values and their reactions. The result is that the client-coaches begin to perceive their own story through EXIT and the figured world of Fryshuset, in which their actions are not the outcome of their character, but are recast in a frame of understanding that makes them an outcome of the client-coaches and their context.

Clients often have problems with social relations, for example, yet, according to EXIT's perspective, this is not because they are stupid, evil or uncaring, but because they have not learned how to interact with others. This perspective opens up the possibility that an individual – a client or client-coach – can change by learning the rules of social interaction.

Moreover, client-coaches are surrounded by role models who are former neo-Nazis and/or gang members, but who are now experienced coaches, proving that it is possible to change your life for good. These role models constitute a mediating device, as the client-coaches can use the more experienced coaches' personal development and stories to understand the steps leading to a change of lifestyle and identity – and that it is possible to change. The personalisation of the identity as coach and no longer a former gang member or extremist takes place as the client-coach begins to identify with the other coaches.

Through comparing his life to theirs, he sees that they have been where he is now and that they are like him and he is like them. Their stories become subjective mediating devices: means by which the client-coach can direct and evaluate his own behaviour (ibid. 75).

*Erik, a coach from Passus, is convinced of the importance of finding people's passions. After having found his passion - as he tells one day in the office - he has entered a whole new path*

*in life. Initially, when he was no longer a client, he did not want to be a coach because there were many other jobs that paid much more, and he thought that it was very important to have a lot of money; he presumed that money was his driving force. But over time in Passus he found out that money did not drive him quite as much as he thought. Now he is really passionate about his job as a coach, which he now feels is more important than money* (field note 2012). The quote illustrates how this coach has altered his self-perception by engaging in different activities, as clients are encouraged to do while at EXIT or Passus while at the same time perceiving his story through the frame of interpretation of EXIT and Fryshuset. Erik makes the figured world of Fryshuset his personal knowledge as he explains how finding his passion has made him become a passionate coach.

Through their work at EXIT, client-coaches become an active part of numerous social relations and are at the same time positioned as people who contribute in important ways. The old conception of self in relation to being former neo-Nazis and clients is weakened through a process of day-to-day encounters – participating in collaborative activities, engaging in conversation and interaction – on which their positions as staff members at EXIT are built. This process alters their identity as former neo-Nazis and clients and their perception of the figured world that once gave their identity meaning: the White Power Movement (Christensen 2014).

In the formation of a new identity, a motivated individual comes, with the social encouragement and insistence of others, to interpret the world in new ways and to position him/herself and emotionally invest him/herself in that world (Holland et al. 1998: 73-74).

To develop from a client into a coach is a journey of personal and professional change. Through the situations described above, clients become part of a learning process, through which they gradually develop their identity as coaches. Yet the client-coaches also struggle with personal problems, which have an impact on their performance as coaches and their daily well-being. Supporting client-coaches in moving forward requires a supportive team of colleagues, as will be discussed below.

## Learning how to solve problems in your own life by interacting with supportive colleagues

While I was at the office at EXIT and Passus, I soon noticed the very inclusive way in which people interacted. The tone among staff is positive, and the employees joke and laugh. Staff often hug each other, engage in play-fights and in other ways show physical signs of caring. The office of EXIT and Pas-

Passus is not big, and in the middle of it there is a table with ten seats. The table is where all the meetings take place, the staff eats their lunch and drink coffee, and the clients of Passus sometimes sit and talk with whomever is available. Hilde – a social counsellor - once said some of the clients do not have a family so they try to create a homely and a caring atmosphere and make an effort to avoid resembling an institution. Many of the clients and coaches have extremely negative associations with institutions such as 24-hour youth care centres and prisons.

The employees seem to perceive their positions as something more than jobs. They meet at each other's homes and seem to know about each other's lives in great detail; sometimes they telephone one another at night to continue a discussion about important issues. One day at the office a client-coach told the staff that he did not feel well. He was feeling very down, lonely and lost and, as he said, when he felt that way, he had a tendency to isolate himself. This particular client-coach is struggling a lot with problems related to his upbringing and his past as a criminal and gang member. Several of the employees asked whether they could help him or what they could do to help him: *'Would it help if we dropped by your house? Or should we phone you?'* Several of the staff members ended up exchanging phone numbers with the client-coach and told him that he needed to let them know if he was not feeling well.

At a later stage, he and his girlfriend were beaten up one weekend. He started calling his colleagues and talked to them about the episode, and as he said, they helped him find other ways of approaching the episode. A situation like that could easily have made him relapse into an old behaviour of using violence and thinking about revenge, but he felt that talking to his colleagues had helped him handle the situation in a different way.

The combination of coaches with a criminal and/or extremist past also demands that the other staff members are open to a relationship with their colleagues that may go beyond work issues – when needed. The staff members at EXIT and Passus are familiar with the diverse difficulties client-coaches may be struggling with and the time perspective involved. It can take a long time to change behavioural patterns that may be a result of upbringing combined with a criminal lifestyle, easily spanning 15 to 20 years.

The colleagues urging the client-coach to let them know if things are not going well demonstrates how the process of developing new dispositions in the client-coaches is continued during the process of becoming a coach. As the client-coaches start identifying with the coaches by interacting with them and comparing their life to theirs, they can see that the coaches have been where they are now. The other coaches seem to become a symbolic device, provid-

ing examples to think about and follow as the client-coaches become aware of alternative ways of reacting and interacting: being trustful, caring and showing emotions (also men). The client-coaches are also made aware of the possibility of calling a friend when things are tough, which becomes salient for them, and which through repetition they come to embody, whereby a different reaction pattern and way of behaving becomes established (Holland et al. 1998).

Due to their different positions, some staff members have more responsibilities than others. As one of the social counsellors explains, their job is to introduce a structure to the flexible model, which can be a challenge, and to help solve legislative issues in relation to the system. Yet as Ingrid says, staff members who do not have a past as extremists or criminals also need to continue paying attention to the coaches' well-being and be prepared to help if support is needed. She elaborates:

*'The approach is that these guys can use their own experiences to help others; the disadvantage is that they have had the same problems, and we have at times offered these employees therapy. We have also done this: we had a guy who worked here for many years and was very good at it. But each year at Christmas he suffered from depression as he was involved in so many cases that reminded him of his own childhood, and he got supervision and things like that. A friend of mine, who is a psychiatrist, who simply helps the organisation, talked to him. And then he always had time off from mid-December until after New Year, as he could not find peace. But he came back in mid-January, and the rest of the group had to accept that; there is difference. The rest of us can just be glad that we do not feel bad.*

*No...but we all try to show extra consideration for those with a difficult background, and to consider how they feel. I know that both Hilde and Anna (two social counsellors) and I make an effort to help them with it. For example, Gunnar (a coach at both EXIT and Passus) had a very heavy case. When he came in the door, even though I was busy with something else, I just dropped it when I saw how he looked – he came round the corner and in here... into my office. I didn't really have time, but that's how we do it; we work like this. He talks about why it is so difficult, and I listen to him for 15 minutes and say a few words: 'Yes, that's how it can be' or something. Or maybe it takes longer, but we must always be ready to drop what we are doing, and that's the way we try to support the ones with a difficult background.'*

Thus the organisation requires the employees' acceptance of different needs among staff members and a willingness to meet these needs by treating people in different ways, for example, by giving some people more days off than others and letting some coaches do workouts during working hours. As Ingrid said during an informal conversation, staff members often discuss issues related to clients' cases during the day as they represent the most demanding part of the job. This is also encouraged as a way of continuously getting different

perspectives on the coaches' interaction with clients and issues the coach perceives as difficult and as a way of reducing the emotional pressure of client work. Through this sort of interaction, the client-coaches are coming to perceive themselves, the world and what they do through the figured world of Fryshuset and the practice of working with clients at EXIT.

A conversation between Anne, a social counsellor, and Magnus, a client-coach at Passus, illustrates this point: *Magnus and Anna were talking about how Magnus felt that he was lying to a client. Anna said, 'No, you are not lying. Because what does it mean to lie?' Magnus answered, 'That it's not telling the truth'. Anna continued; 'But you are not lying; you are listening to what the client says, but he is not ready to hear your opinion right now. That is not the same as lying. Magnus had had enough of lies, as he said, and he has taken an oath that he will never lie again. He has had it with lies as his father lied to everybody: his own parents, his brothers and his children* (field note 2012). The reason for having social counsellors on staff is also in part to ensure the quality of the work being done with clients and in part to supervise the coaches. Ingrid, Hilde and Anna (all social counsellors) influence client support through their work with the coaches. They are the ones who have the overall responsibility for handling frustrations, anger, sorrow and insecurity and for supporting (client-)coaches who are having doubts about themselves and the way they handle their clients.

As the quote illustrates, the dialogue between the social counsellor Anna and the client-coach also adds to his perspective of, in this case, lying: that lying is not necessarily the same as not telling the client exactly how you perceive the situation here and now. The dialogues add additional nuances to the situation, making the client-coach aware of new salient points others than those he considered when he perceived the situation through the lenses of his own upbringing.

The social counsellors also help client-coaches sort out their own personal issues. Having been involved in a criminal lifestyle often results in unsolved questions of debt, cases of children being resettled in foster families and other sorts of social issues involving the social system. Against the background of the wage subsidy job model, and perhaps more importantly, EXIT's practice of solving the problems at hand, the social counsellors among the staff support client-coaches by accompanying them to meetings at municipal offices or in other ways help them sort out their cases in the system.

The client-coaches add pivotal knowledge and insight to the work of EXIT and Passus; the organisation would simply not be able to function the way it does without them. Yet for the cooperation with them to succeed it is important to have developed a practice that includes staff who are more than

usually dedicated to their tasks and to the well-being of their fellow human beings.

## When extremist and criminal experiences become useful knowledge in a diverse group of employees: concluding remarks

*It can be hard if you've been hostile towards society for 20 years to go to the social services and ask for help. Or to go to the police you have been in conflict with and have had confrontations with and say, 'I need help'. This step can sometimes be difficult. So we think we can be the link and help take the initial contact and ensure that the meeting becomes a success'* (interview transcript 2012).

The staff members at EXIT and Passus have created a practice in which the 'we' in the above-mentioned quote is a link that can secure a positive meeting between two agents from different figured worlds: a neo-Nazi and a representative of the Swedish society, for example, the police or the social services. This is possible because the staff can understand the case from both sides. The 'we' also refers to an integrated whole: the staff, which comprises different employees who play equally important roles in making such a meeting a success.

EXIT's diverse staff members thus play the role of cultural translators and mediators between the institutions – for example, social services and the police – in the Swedish society and members from gangs or extremist groups who want to leave their criminal life and reintegrate into society. Each individual employee at EXIT and Passus represents a very different incorporated experience and knowledge of how to act, which he/she has learned by being an agent in different figured worlds, as, for example, a former gang member or extremist, social counsellor or academic. Incorporated experience and knowledge of how to act acquired by participating in one figured world – for example, the White Power Movement – may, when the individual enters a different figured world, form the basis for new competences and positions. Yet the opposite may also happen; a person may find that he loses opportunities when he enters a different realm of interpretation or figured world precisely because of his past (Hasse 2002:242, Holland et al. 1998).

For the coaches at EXIT/Passus, their criminal and extremist experience would in today's job market and in society in general result in lost opportunities. Yet because they are engaged in a world figured by the cultural model of Fryshuset, they have developed into agents in that world. They have gradually come to perceive their story through EXIT and Fryshuset's frame of interpre-

tation, transforming their extremist self-understanding and identity into that of a coach and social worker.

During the process, many of their basic assumptions have been changed or reorganised, and the coaches have developed a new perspective on themselves, their (previous) problems and what the world is like. They have come to interpret their stories and themselves as part of – and as an outcome of – a specific social and historical context. This means that the coaches, through the process described above, have undergone a reorientation – a process not only of learning, but also of valuation and elevation – of their stories, their identity and their self-understanding (Holland et al. 1998).

Over time, when the figured world of Fryshuset comes to constitute the coaches' self-knowledge and frame of reality, the reorientation makes them categorise others in a different way and see their previous assumptions in a new light. People whom the coaches previously perceived as, for example, 'enemies', might as an outcome of the reorientation become categorised as 'former enemies' and finally end as illustrated by a situation involving a coach from Passus:

*'Magnus told us how he had for months had thoughts about a person from the public authorities. He had thought about him almost daily and had always wanted to beat him up. Then he met him a few days ago - and ended up talking to him for about 10 minutes. He felt very relieved afterwards, he said, and he does not think about him – as much – any longer'* (field note 2012).

A coach from EXIT also remarked that he has come to perceive things in a way he hardly believed possible:

*'Gunnar says that he has knee-jerk kinds of reactions when he sees people from the criminal world, and then he knows exactly what they are like and how they think – a perception he used to be so annoyed by when the police used to perceive him in the exact same way. But now – as he says – he does much of the same and feels that he can see right through the clients'* (field note 2012).

These brief examples illustrate how individuals, when they come to identify themselves with their position as coaches at EXIT and Passus, no longer act according to the logic at work in the criminal world as it is not their personal knowledge any longer. Instead, they evaluate situations and act according to the norms adding sense to the figured world of Fryshuset and EXIT.

The coaches' changed perspective shows how EXIT's values have become their values, making them perceive their personal experiences as former right-wing extremists through these lenses. This is the crucial precondition for their work and for them to be able to use their knowledge of the extremist right



wing or gang life to help others to leave what they have come to view as a destructive and anti-democratic lifestyle.

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# Article 4: When Good Intentions are Not Enough - A Successful Mentor-Mentee Relation Requires a Deliberate Practice

This article is published in an extended version (10.446 words) English in the Danish psychological journal *Psyke & Logos* (1) 2015. This article is 9.536 words)

## **Abstract:**

Inspired by a neo-Vygotskian approach, this article discusses the use of a mentoring scheme at EXIT, a Swedish organisation supporting neo-Nazis' disengagement from the extremist right. EXIT links mentees – individuals in the process of leaving the extreme right – to mentors – employees who are former neo-Nazis. The article illuminates why good intentions and a shared past between mentor and mentee are not enough for a development-oriented relation to occur; supporting mentees struggling with the outcomes of their involvement in the extremist right requires a deliberate practice. The main argument of the article is that for mentors to contribute to mentees' development and reintegration into democratic society, they need to have contextualised and reinterpreted their own narrative of (dis)engagement and to combine it with a deliberate practice when interacting with mentees.

**Keywords:** mentoring scheme, situated learning, development, identity processes, right-wing extremism

## When good intentions are not enough - A successful mentor-mentee relation requires a deliberate practice

*'Jeff (a coach) has worked with a very difficult guy; he has killed someone and is very damaged... He explodes with anger at less than nothing, you know, he becomes a victim, he becomes furious and is a very strong guy and very unbalanced. And I ask Jeff, "Do you like Preben (the client)?" "Yes". It comes so fast and I think it's what keeps the two together. After all, he has succeeded in giving this guy some tools so he will not do time again, he can stop himself, and he doesn't get into fights anymore as the first thing he does when he enters a pub. He's a guy who has tattoos all over his head and has been a hopeless case since he was 15. I think it is partly because Jeff has used CBT; he has had one year of training in CBT, Cognitive behavioural therapy, and has worked with these techniques. But I also think that Preben feels that he has for the first time formed an alliance with a human being and Jeff holds on ... Jeff may well feel that it will be difficult to let go of this guy because when will this treatment end?... I think we as a group have different roles, but I think there is love for the clients, that they like them, and here (at EXIT) you can build on that, which you can't do in the social services or in therapeutic relations'* (Interview transcript 2012)

The quote touches upon core issues in this article, as it discusses how the Swedish organisation EXIT links situated learning processes to trustful relationships between mentors and mentees to support neo-Nazis<sup>79</sup> in disengaging from the extremist right. EXIT's practice for assisting their mentees, whom they describe as their *clients* – subjects in the process of leaving the extreme right – is to connect them to a mentor, a *coach* – an employee who has been part of the extremist right. Preben, the client in the above quote, has come to value Jeff, his coach. For this reason he has become open to Jeff's support, which is aimed at creating a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) to help Preben change his habitual violent behaviour. This is done by introducing Preben to alternative strategies, which Jeff has learned through his own training in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and his work as a coach. The bond between the two plays an all-important role in the client's courage to try different approaches. The fact that the coach has previous experience in the extreme right makes it easier for the client to identify with him, as the client perceives their shared experience as being of paramount importance to their relationship. For the coach, the common past is just one aspect of EXIT's multifaceted practice of bolstering clients' desire to disengage and strengthen their self-understanding and social skills. Yet why are identification

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<sup>79</sup>I use the terms 'right-wing extremist' and 'neo-Nazi' as synonyms, although I am aware that not all right-wing extremists are neo-Nazis, whereas all neo-Nazis are right-wing extremists

based on a shared past, the desire to help others on the basis of one's own experiences and empathy with a fellow human being not enough for a successful mentorship to develop?

Initially, a shared past is crucial, but EXIT's detailed knowledge of the target group, the individual client and the coaches' specific approaches to clients are decisive factors for a mentorship to have a life-changing impact on the client. Yet what conditions are needed for a coach to support clients' development, defined as a definitive change of self-perception and social understanding to underpin their reintegration into democratic society?

The article is inspired by the cultural-historical school and a neo-Vygotskian approach, which conceptualises action and agency as having recourse to symbolic structures of meaning (Reckwitz 2002). I use this complex of theories in a heuristic way to point out how EXIT's coaches support their clients'<sup>80</sup> development by interacting with them. This approach enables me to identify how development occurs as an outcome of interaction between individuals and their social and natural surroundings, mediated through culturally defined devices (Wertsch 2007, Holland et al. 1998).

The article starts by providing a brief introduction to EXIT, which is part of a major youth centre in Stockholm called Fryshuset, and the main problems EXIT's clients are struggling to overcome in the process of leaving the extreme right wing behind. Next, I detail how the coaches' – as “formers” (former right-wing extremists) – ‘sense of the game’ plays an essential role in EXIT's assessment of potential clients and interaction with them. Then I describe how EXIT uses activities to build up basic trust between clients and coaches, which EXIT perceives as crucial for clients' openness towards the coaches and their support. Finally, I argue how the combination of a trustful relationship, specific forms of dialogue and activities trigger the clients' transformational process. I conclude by pointing out conditions that are crucial when mentoring schemes are used to support people in the process of leaving the extremist right behind.

## EXIT's approach to client support

EXIT is, as noted above, an integrated part of a large institution called Fryshuset: the “Cold Store”. Fryshuset is a type of youth centre in Sweden that comprises a number of projects with the overall goal of empowering

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<sup>80</sup> This article is a result of a PhD project terminating in December 2014 at the Department of Psychology and Educational Studies at Roskilde University in Denmark. I did two months of participant observation and 23 interviews with clients and staff at EXIT.

youngsters through activities, the building of social relations and interaction with adults (Carlberg 2008:80). Fryshuset is based in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, and together, the centres offer 50 different projects, sports and cultural facilities. EXIT has grown out of Fryshuset's practice of building organisations by involving motivated people and pooling them with employees with various competences (Christensen 2014 in press). The organisation is just one of the many social projects, NGOs and organisations linked together under the auspices of Fryshuset in Stockholm.

EXIT's approach to people involved in the extreme right is that their reason for joining such groups is *not* because they hold extremist views; rather, they *acquire* extremist views because they have joined the groups for other reasons (Bjørge 2009).

EXIT's staff members' positive experience of working with right-wing extremists in the process of leaving the White Power Movement has led them to extend their work to clients who want to leave organised street and (motorcycle) gangs, who are in need of much the same support as former neo-Nazis. The result is the sister organisation Passus, which works according to the same assumptions and methods, but is aimed at gang members. EXIT's and Passus' staff work from the same office as a team (Christensen 2013, 2014 A, and 2014 B).

From Fryshuset's as well as EXIT's and Passus' perspective, members of street and biker gangs, criminal groups and extremist networks are all perceived as having a destructive lifestyle and anti-democratic behaviour in a democratic society as members of these sorts of groups deny other citizens their democratic rights through, for example, surveillance of political opponents (extremist right), blackmail (gangs) and violence or the threat of it. When Fryshuset explicitly defines a lifestyle as destructive, they also explicate that other life conditions are perceived as normatively better. One – of several (see Christensen 2014 in press) – of Fryshuset's explicit values is: *We provide encouragement, confidence and responsibility, which creates knowledge and self-esteem that highlights the individual's inherent power* (author's translation, footnote<sup>81</sup>). Through stated values like this, Fryshuset points to conditions they perceive as essential for the individual to achieve self-fulfilment and empowerment, rather than presenting a model for 'how you ought to live your life'. These explicit values provide Fryshuset, EXIT and Passus with an ethical basis they can refer to when they point out critical issues present in the figured worlds of gangs and

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<sup>81</sup> <http://fryshuset.se/om-fryshuset/vision-och-vardegrund>



extremist political groups that prevent individuals from developing self-esteem and life quality. A *figured world* is a...;

‘socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation connected to a social practice in which particular characters or actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts and particular outcomes are valued over others.’ (Holland et al. 1998:52).

It is a cultural base framing individuals’ improvisation as they develop in a heuristic manner (ibid). Therefore, the meaning systems clients have developed as an outcome of their participation in gangs or extremist groups must be dealt with in their disengagement process as they influence their reactions and their behavioural and thought patterns, which they often need support to alter. Since the coaches<sup>82</sup> are former neo-Nazis themselves, they have experienced what seem to be common factors in a disengagement process: threats from former friends, feelings of loneliness, aggression, violent reaction patterns, distrust of people and lack of job opportunities (Bjergo 2009, footnote <sup>83</sup>, Christensen 2014 A). However, the coaches’ participation in EXIT’s and Passus’ daily practice and their work with clients have led them to identify themselves as coaches (Christensen 2014 in press).

The Nazi movement is described by several of the coaches as a political sect, in which members are schooled in black and white thinking, notions of a conspiracy against society and the idea that everyone outside the group is an enemy to be fought. Belonging to these groups can create social disability in the form of difficulties in resolving conflicts and managing stress, and former participants often need to process the ideas that they have been immersed in for a long period of time (Lodenious 2014 in Christensen 2014 in press).

When the coaches work with the clients, they involve them in different activities, for example, museum visits, weightlifting, walk and talk, going to cafés and paintball. These activities are means to allow the clients to experience alternative activities, to identify new interests to become involved in and to develop new social skills. EXIT perceives personal change as an outcome of the individual’s repeated participation in a variety of activities that give rise to diverse emotions and thereby new connections in the brain. This, as several

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<sup>82</sup>I describe coaches as males only, as I have only met two women who had been engaged as coaches at EXIT. One of them stopped being a coach after a short while, but continued as a lecturer. Clients, most often men, misunderstood her interest in them and responded as if she had an intimate interest in them instead of ‘just’ being their coach. The other woman has only had one client for a number of years and is not part of EXIT per se.

<sup>83</sup> [http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/are-you-looking-to-break-away-from-your-nazi-gang-exit-deutchland-bernd-wagner](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/are-you-looking-to-break-away-from-your-nazi-gang-exit-deutchland-bernd-wagner)

staff members explained, is a precondition for people to be able to develop new ways of (re)acting (Christensen 2014 in press).

The core of EXIT's work is client support, drawing attention to the term *client*, and the line EXIT draws between humans and their actions. *Client*, several coaches are convinced, was introduced by one of the first leaders of the client programme, Ingrid, a social worker, who was recruited to EXIT and added her lifelong experience from work in therapeutic institutions to the organisation's practice. Nowadays, the term *client* is used in a habitual sense, but only seems to have significance for the employees as a means for them to avoid referring to the *clients* as *formers*, implying that you can never really leave your past identity behind, which works contrary to EXIT's starting point.

EXIT's methods of involving the client in alternative activities to alter the person's self-understanding and social skills in a sense make humans equal to their actions. But EXIT insists on their clients' humanity, irrespective of their actions, by postulating that a line should be drawn between people's actions and people as human beings. By this moral stance, EXIT avoids falling into the trap of dehumanising others by defining them as demons on the basis of a judgment of their actions and ideological convictions. In this way, they also counteract the extremist right wing's postulation of some people being more human than others, because they consider inequality among people to be a nature-given principle (Bjørge 1997). Through their acknowledgement of the clients' humanness, EXIT also opens the door for them to reenter the community, and the organisation confirms their stance in the collective responsibility of creating a society for all humans (Lippestad 2013).

The coaches' goal of interaction with their clients is intended to support the clients' motivation to disengage as well as to encourage them, through new situations and dialogue, to enter a *zone of proximal development*, which is...

'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or collaboration with more capable peers.' (Vygotsky 1978: 86).

In line with this approach, EXIT does not perceive people according to the everyday perception of identity as linked to an inner core, which leads to the obvious characterisation of people who use violence or threats as stupid, uncaring or evil. On the contrary, in EXIT's view, people who act in such ways do so because they have not learned other strategies of handling themselves in the situation. EXIT thus turns the perception of acts into a question of mastering behavioural strategies rather than a sign of character. In this way, EXIT

approaches identity like Dorothy Holland et al. (1998:31) ‘as a sign of self in practice, not as a sign of self in essence’. This perspective opens up new opportunities for individuals as they can alter themselves by (inter)acting in different ways as they develop a better self-understanding and sensitivity towards the unspoken norms of social life.

As clients regard the coaches as role models, the coaches’ narratives also become a mediating device for them (Holland et al. 1998). A mediating device is a tool for reflection constructed by assigning meaning to an object or behaviour as it develops within a locus of social activity (ibid.). As clients identify with the coaches, who are former neo-Nazis and/or gang members who have become experienced coaches, the coaches constitute a mediating device for the clients by introducing ‘a way of doing things’ the clients can draw on for further improvisation.

In the next section I shall focus on how the coaches’ ‘sense of the game’ as former right-wing extremists and/or gang members forms an essential part of EXIT’s assessment of potential clients. This approach also points to how the subject’s heuristic development is linked to sediment from his/her past experiences (Holland et al. 1998).

## The impact of the coaches’ ‘sense of the game’

EXIT and Passus coaches have, with one exception, been members of the White Power Movement and/or criminal gangs. A gang or an extremist right-wing group constitutes, as mentioned, a *figured world* in Holland et al.’s (1998) neo-Vygotskian approach. By becoming members in a figured world, individuals acquire bodily know-how and social and cultural competences, through what Jean Lave (1996) describes as a situated learning process. Over time, the process shapes the participants’ perception of a culturally defined context of action as issues of central importance in their particular realm of reality are pointed out to them by more experienced participants (Hasse 2002, Holland et al. 1998). There are many figured worlds, and the coaches’ personal narratives involve having left the figured world of the White Power Movement to become integrated subjects in a different one: EXIT (Christensen 2014 in press).

The coaches’ sediment from past experiences conditions their history-in-person, upon which they now improvise, which positions them to be able to act ‘in between’ two figured worlds, using knowledge from one world – the extremist right – but interpreted through the practice learned in a different one: EXIT. Due to their past as gang members and/or right-wing extremists,

coaches at EXIT and Passus have a bodily know-how as well as social and cultural competences that give them a ‘feeling for the game’ (Bourdieu: 104-105 in Holland et al. 1998) in these environments. This ‘sense of the game’ in different culturally defined worlds (ibid., Christensen 2014 in press) is the competence that gives the coaches a significant position at EXIT, as they can switch between the perspectives of the figured world of the extreme right or gang and the one as a coach in EXIT.

Because of their past, the coaches know the symbolic and material artefacts that evoke the figured world of the White Power Movement as well as the possibilities and constraints of that world. The coaches’ personal experience of the process in and out of the extreme right has become conscious knowledge through the disengagement process they have gone through, which implies an expanded notion of their narrative of participation as well as a transformation of their self-understanding (Christensen 2014 in press).

The coaches also keep themselves updated about the extremist right scene through news on the internet, books and reports to maintain a present-day frame of reference they can use in their assessment of potential clients and when interacting with them.

The coaches’ strength is the unique combination of their own experience of participation in the extremist right with the methods learned through their work as coaches, which also makes them interpret their past differently (Christensen 2014 in press).

To become clients at EXIT, the individuals mainly contact the organisation themselves, while some are referred to EXIT by youth workers, police officers, teachers or family members (Bjørge 2009, Christensen 2013). Using former clients gives legitimacy to the organisation in relation to the target group (ibid.), even though right-wing extremists’ awareness of EXIT’s existence becomes ironically underlined when staff, as a former client told, are referred to as: *‘idiots, fucking pigs, fucking communists, fucking Jews’* and other words in order to de-humanise them.

When EXIT is contacted by people doubting their participation in the extremist right, the coach asks questions that support the potential client’s doubts during the first conversation. As a coach explained when asked what he means when he talks about planting a seed of doubt: *‘You have to try to get as much information about him (the potential client) as possible and try to adjust the information: What will actually be a seed of doubt for this person? Usually something that they cannot voice in their environment, something they have been thinking about and you can provide more information that kind of...let’s say they have been thinking about; “Are we really going to win this war? Or is this struggle really contributing to something?” And then you can*

say, "Well, when I was a Nazi 15 years ago, we said this and this," and he will say, "Well, we say the same thing now," and then you go, "Oh, is that so? Maybe not much has happened in 15 years?! Where do you see yourself in 15 years? Is this just a record repeating itself? Because they say that they are really gaining ground and now is the time to fight and they have been saying that for 15 years, so..." (interview transcript 2012).

As Jeff – the coach – explains, he is confirming that 'Yes, there is reason to leave this environment', since he indirectly makes it clear that it is going nowhere. Jeff's assessment is based on his insight into the environment since he knows that it is impossible for the members to show any signs of doubt. Yet he also uses approaches from his work as coach by not starting an ideological discussion or in any other way explicitly telling the potential client what to do; rather he presents things in such a manner that the client can make the decision. As he says:

*"I am not telling them why they should quit. It is more them telling themselves why they should quit if they have doubts. Usually you cannot voice doubts in these environments, because if you start voicing doubts, you become a security risk and you are not trustworthy anymore, so you probably won't move up in the hierarchy. So that is one of their biggest problems: that they don't have a place where they can actually confess, where they can say: "I am really tired of the struggle; I don't want to hate anymore; I don't want to listen to this propaganda – it depresses me" (interview transcript 2012).*

Before EXIT can assess whether a person can become a client, he/she first has to meet two coaches, who try to get as detailed an overview of the person as possible. The initial phase is very important as a failed client case, one coach explained, is often due to issues the coach has not been aware of. At the initial meeting, the coaches, amongst other things, wish to find out about potential threats against the individual as they can become dangerous for the staff as well. They also identify potential substance abuse, psychological issues and the person's personal network – as this is an asset during the disengagement process. This information is important, but the client's motivation is paramount for his/her possibility of leaving the extremist right wing. Afterwards, the coaches discuss their impressions and any information they have received from other institutions with which the person has been in contact, with the staff at EXIT and Passus. EXIT cooperates with different institutions when dealing with clients with psychological issues or substance abuse. This observation from a meeting illuminates how the coaches' personal knowledge of the clients' figured world gives them a very detailed frame of reference when discussing client cases, which benefits other employees, who in turn can contribute with their own particular insight.

*Hilde (a social worker), Gunnar (a coach and former gang member) and Karl (the only coach who has not been involved gangs or the extremist right) are discussing whether they should take on a man involved in a gang as a client in Passus. They are trying to ascertain where the potential client has been. They can see that he has apparently been in Malmö, Gothenburg and Stockholm. Gunnar: I am always sceptical when people have been in Malmö, especially if they leave the city; there's a reason why they leave. In Malmö there are people from the Balkans to whom the young ones look up. We do not know who he has tipped off, what kind of network he has and what else he might be involved in'.*

To know about the similarities and differences of gangs in different cities in Sweden and by identifying what they do not know, Gunnar is outlining points of references for the staff. He makes them aware that there is a difference between gangs in Stockholm and gangs in Malmö, and he identifies what they need to find out to avoid their lack of knowledge about the client becoming a security risk for them. The meeting continues: *'Gunnar perceives Malmö as something entirely different. He says: "It's a whole different ball game than Stockholm". Hilde also asks Gunnar if he thinks there might be drugs involved, as she thinks the potential client has too much money. Gunnar rejects this idea, explaining: "They (the gang) would not use him in that connection if he's placed where he is in the hierarchy"* (field note 2012). The coach's own experience of the hierarchical structure of gangs enables him to assess the client's potential role in it, which would be hard to identify for anybody without an insider perspective of gangs and what the hierarchy entails for the individual member.

Because of the coaches' incorporated insight into the figured worlds of gangs and/or the White Power Movement, they assess the information about clients differently than an outsider, who would not know where in the hierarchy a member selling drugs would be placed. But insider knowledge can also be a challenge for the coaches, as will become evident.

The clients' awareness of the coaches having been members of gangs and/or the extremist right also adds value to the clients' perception of the coaches' judgment. During a meeting, two coaches were discussing the difficulties involved in determining when to be firm with a client. Gunnar explained that gang members face direct consequences of their actions in the gang. Gunnar – who had left a gang five years earlier – argued that clients should not think that they can manipulate coaches in EXIT/Passus without facing consequences immediately. Jeff did not agree with this standpoint. He described how a client had annoyed him by repeatedly bragging about his position in the White Power Movement and how he had the potential to become a leader like Adolf Hitler. Jeff, who has been a coach with EXIT for about ten years, said:

*'You can't just say right to his face, "You are nothing, you don't even have the potential to become a scout in the movement!" He was a boy, 14 years old, and I was so sick and tired of listening to him bragging. I had enough and answered him harshly with the result that he became frightened. Afterwards he thought that I was an idiot. I lost contact with the boy, who is now still in the movement – it is often difficult to estimate how to react and when to be firm or not' (field note 2012).*

The clients know that the coaches have been members themselves, therefore the coaches' words in this respect are harder for a client to brush aside and may also hit harder, as the words have a different legitimacy than they would coming from a social worker without a background in the extremist right. The quote also emphasises how difficult it is for coaches to determine an appropriate reaction to clients, who often push the limits in their interaction with them.

The coaches' different perspectives on which strategies they find appropriate might be an outcome of their individual history-in-person (Holland et al. 1998). For example, the amount of time that has elapsed since a coach has disengaged might have an impact on their views on the question of firmness. The shared past of clients and coaches is an advantage when coaches have a reflective attitude towards their own 'sense of the game' and how they use it in their assessment of, and interaction with, clients. As the last example shows, trust is a key issue in supporting clients, as a lack of confidence between coach and client can disrupt the relationship. EXIT's approach to encouraging clients to trust the coaches is the focus of the next section.

## Trust is a prerequisite for clients' openness to guidance

EXIT's perception of the individual's identity as a 'sign of self in practice' (Holland et al. 1998) places great importance on the social milieu in which the individual acts. Therefore, the relationship between coaches and clients is the core of EXIT's client support. Joint activities for coaches and clients create a possibility for clients to see the coaches' actions in a given situation. By objectifying the situation, clients may use the experience to direct their own behaviour when they are in a similar situation, thereby turning the situation into a mediating device.

The coach Jeff's recounting of difficult client cases reveals how trust between people cannot be hurried; it grows out of joint activities and dialogue over time. As this coach's experience shows, EXIT is very deliberate about instigating a trust-building process since trust is the foundation on which everything

else in the process depends. Jeff recounts: *“The first thing we do is we try to establish relationships, to establish a kind of basic trust. But with this guy... it usually doesn’t take me long, but with this guy it took me six months to get to the point when he actually asked me: ‘What do you think of this?’ I was like: ‘I think this and that,’ and he said: ‘I will take that into consideration’. It took me six months just to get that: ‘I have to listen to what you actually have to say,’ and before that, I didn’t really try to change anything. I just tried to get to know him, work out with him, go to the supermarket with him, trying to make him feel comfortable and safe’* (Interview transcript 2012).

Going to the park, the supermarket, working out or any other joint activities are, as the quote indicates, important as shared experiences that help people make some sense of each other, which is the first step in a long process of trust building. The client’s statement of taking Jeff’s opinion into consideration is a sign that the client values Jeff. This leads him to acknowledge Jeff by paying attention to his points of view and their relation in a different way than previously.

EXIT uses physical activity to trigger the trust building processes, which opens up the possibility for interaction that can lead to a zone of proximal development. Such a zone becomes possible when the interaction allows for understanding, coordination and transformation of different experiences and when one person’s action generates and supports another person’s initiative (Zuckerman 2007:43). For such interaction to occur, the relation between client and coach from EXIT’s perspective needs to be based on honesty and respect, which allows affection and trust to evolve. If trust does not develop, the client is introduced to a different coach. Even though the relationship between client and coach is based on an emotional link, it is still a professional one as it evolves as an outcome of specific approaches and convictions.

EXIT uses weightlifting as a means of creating a zone of proximal development in a Vygotskian sense as several parts of the activity becomes a mediating device for the clients’ alternative ways of mastering themselves.

During an interview with the previous leader of EXIT, Ingrid recounts how she explained weightlifting as a therapeutic tool to the coaches, to help them perceive the parallel processes she thinks take place during a session by pointing out how it is about working out, but also embodies building trust, self-esteem and so on. Clients often do weightlifting to fill in the gap left after leaving the gang or the extremist group. However, as she says, it also engages



the client in a joint activity, creating a situated learning process with the coach<sup>84</sup>.

Ingrid's identification of the parallel processes for the coaches emphasises how work with clients transforms not only the clients, but also the coaches. Through weightlifting, clients and coaches get closer to one another, initially in a non-verbal way, as they have to pay attention to each other and the barbell. This can create a zone of proximal development as lifting the heavy barbell involves the participants' awareness of each other's needs. The client needs to be attentive to the coach's needs, as he depends on him – which in turn requires attention, cooperation and trust between the two. Ingrid explains: *'Parallel processes involve a client such as Anders, who, like many of Passus' and Exit's clients, has had early experiences of shortcomings; they have had serious traumas, bad school experiences, a negative self-image and of course, poor self-confidence. When they work out with their role model, as coaches often become, they are given a lot of attention during the training session. I can also see that they are mentally guided. They are both guided and given attention, and they also get immediate confirmation of their progress from the coach'*.

The coaches have continued weightlifting after becoming coaches in EXIT. Now they use this competence to guide the clients and as a means for them to become calm and focused – in contrast to their previous experience, when weightlifting was, amongst other things, a means to build up a strong body to signal masculinity, strength and invincibility to others. When clients are given instructions, they must pay attention to what the coach is saying. This may position the coach as the experienced one, but as the activity is based on cooperation, clients and coaches are equally dependent on each other's help.

Ingrid continues: *'So you could say that we go through the body to work with their minds and it is therapeutic because – as is very often the case in therapy – it's not words that liberate, it is the relationship, and to be noticed by the therapist is indeed very significant. I think you can compare this to what happens during weightlifting and the relationship that is created... and with our boys and guys, you often have to start by going back to basics, which is a good method to use. It passes over defence... it is a parallel process as you hold on here, for it is a matter of life and death if you lose it'*. The barbell is often heavier when people work out together than it is when one person is working out alone, which

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<sup>84</sup> Even though I have only heard about male clients being involved in weightlifting, I do not perceive it as a male-only activity. Thai boxing is another sport offered to Fryshuset's staff and members of both genders and is just as demanding as weightlifting.

makes coaches and clients dependent on each other's help. *'There really is a lot that can be compared with a therapeutic process as you go through the body to reach inside and gain the person's confidence, and then they might also have confidence to talk, but also to be susceptible. When you exercise, tension disappears, restlessness, you may become a little more self-reliant, which also applies to coaches who often have similar problems. Then you go and have lunch, and then you have this dialogue'*.

By using weightlifting, EXIT allows clients to experience togetherness through a shared activity that is not only based on verbal communication. Moreover, the interaction avoids a face-to-face situation that some clients find uncomfortable. After working out, the coach and client eat lunch together – the significances of which I shall expand on below. Ingrid continues: *'The coaches have been in the same situation a few years back ...and I also think that it creates a sense of connection for both the coach and the client and that a lot of parallel things take place. So it's definitely not just training ... I have made it very clear that it is good to perceive it as a tool that creates change...you also learn to interact, I often think too, well, it's like this: your turn and my turn, or like that: now I talk and you listen'* (interview transcript 2012).

The coaches' practice of supporting clients develops through their interaction with other members of staff, who, like Ingrid, have made them aware of points of significance in their interaction with clients – like the parallel processes Ingrid identified.

Situations like the one mentioned above touch upon central issues in the cultural-historical school. According to Vygotsky (1983:145 in Cole 1996), any function in the cultural development of a person appears twice: first between people as an inter-psycho category - Ingrid pointing out signs of significance for the coach - and then within the person, as an intra-psycho category - the coach comes to perceive weightlifting as part of the trust-building process. This underlines the notion that social interaction engages people in a culturally situated learning process as signs of significance are exposed to us by more experienced fellow human beings. It is precisely by means of participating in social interaction that zones of proximal development occur as interpretations are first proposed and worked out - for example, when Ingrid explains the parallel processes to the coaches, or a coach shows a client how to help him handle the barbell - and hence become available to be taken over by individuals (Wertsch 2007), which is also one path on the way to a common figured world.

The support of the clients is linked to a trustful relation because, in EXIT's experience, trust makes zones of proximal development occur between clients and coaches. From EXIT's perception, the meeting between the client and

coach is a meeting in which individuals from peculiar figured worlds meet with the intent of helping the client develop alternative skills and a new understanding that will enable him/her to leave the figured world of the extremist right by becoming engulfed by a different one.

Clients' trust in the coach is crucial as they are supported by the coach in upholding their decision to leave the extremist right and in the first tentative moves towards entering a different figured world. Through dialogue, coaches help clients become reflective about themselves, and through activities, they make the client rehearse the particular repertoire of activities or scripts associated with different figured worlds. I shall expand on this notion below.

## Activities, dialogues and reflections as a means to personal change

The coaches' shared experiences with the clients and their perception of them as important initially create advantages for the coaches as it facilitates the clients' identification with them. The clients' actions and the associated perspectives they have developed as neo-Nazis may seem odd from an outside perspective, which could make clients too distrustful to express them. However, clients' identification with the coaches encourages them to express their thoughts about ideological issues and other questions, which they might have refrained from if the coaches were not formers themselves.

Several clients expressed strong feelings of shame about their involvement in the extremist right, but knowing about their coach's previous involvement assured them that he would not and indeed could not condemn them. Former and present clients also emphasised in interviews how their coach understood them as, in their eyes, nobody else had before. As one of them explained, *'The insight the coach has into what it means to participate is not something he has read in a book'* but rather – as several clients made clear – *'something he knows from personal experience'* (interview transcript 20012). This enables him to discuss the emotional side of participation in the extremist right, a subject they long to discuss in the beginning (Christensen 2013).

The coaches are aware of the importance clients attach to the shared past, but contrary to the clients, they only perceive it to have significance in the initial stages. As one coach explained: *'During the disengagement process, it can be fruitful to introduce the client to other staff members as the shared past can hinder the client's development by making the extremist right a recurrent topic of conversation'* (field note 2013). To start a process of reflection, EXIT encourages clients to question what they believe(d) in, since the culture of the extremist right emphasises hierar-

chal thinking, discourages questioning and promotes an unequal perspective on humans with narrow standards for right and wrong. Clients may have been in these environments for years, and even though they are leaving the group behind, they may remain ideologically convinced. However, the coach Jeff finds it important to be very conscious of his approach when he has dialogues with clients about ideological issues. He starts by identifying the ideological perspective of the client, but is at the same time very aware of NOT getting engaged in any explicit ideological or related ethical discussion. As he explained: *People in the extremist right say stupid things such as, for example, that the Holocaust did not take place, just to infuriate you. Then you pay full attention to them and let them gain control of the discussion – and you. Through such discussions you also open up for the possibility that clients will position you in their black and white world view, which either reduces you to a friend OR an enemy. Jeff tries, as he says, to remain “grey” by not letting the client get a clear picture of his conviction in order to avoid letting the client gain control* (field note 2012).

The clients’ difficulties vary, but since the coaches spend time building a trustful relationship with them, they also have the possibility of identifying in greater detail the individual client’s thought and behavioural patterns as well as his/her frame of reference for activities, hobbies, wishes for the future and the specific issues he/she is struggling with.

Because of the well-defined rules of dos and don’ts in the extremist right, the clients have come to perceive the world and others through a rigid perspective as well as their own emotional distinctions. Through their interaction with the coach, clients also become aware of what they are already doing – and perceive as natural – as the coach introduces them to new norms and values and questions things the client takes for granted. This approach makes clients reflect on their patterns of behaviour and thoughts. For example, interviews with a former client reveal how she, through interaction with her coach, became attentive to the fact that she never used to tell her friends in the White Power Moment about her difficulties at home nor showed any signs of distress. This made her realise that she had become accustomed to blanking out when she was with her allies.

Some clients need help in sorting out the emotional side of having been devoted members of the extremist right by having nuances added to what made them open towards the sense of belonging that plays a huge role for many of them. Whereas others, who have long experience of institutions such as 24-hour care centres and who have served time for extended periods of their life, are in need of very basic training in doing everyday things. As Ingrid explained about a client: *‘He has been in institutions all of his life, he couldn’t go shopping as he*

*didn't know how to enter a shop'. Therefore, he did things like this with his coach during the initial phase, when they also got to know each other. Ingrid continued: 'He has always just been served food; somebody else has cooked, cleaned up. How do you do it?! Do you throw it out when you have only eaten half the food? What do you do? I can't eat any more: Oh, you can put the rest in the refrigerator?' (interview transcript 2012).*

The quote also illuminates how our daily life is a patchwork of different events that we have come to perceive as natural things to do by having strong routines that indicate the appropriate action. But people tend to forget how they initially became accustomed to these things by doing them in collaboration with more capable peers and by repeating them over and over again. When people engage in such everyday situations, they develop what Holland et al. (1998) describe as a script, which indicates a very basic idea about a given event; a heuristic means people use to guide their behaviour. Scripts specify in a very rudimentary way the appropriate people that can participate in an event, the social roles they play, the objects that are used and the sequence of actions and causal relations that apply (Holland and Cole 1995:101). The moment individuals have a vague sense of an appropriate action, they can enter into the flow of the particular event with a partial knowledge that will be enriched by the situation and that they will refine during the repetition of the event (Cole 2003:133). Becoming accustomed to the different events makes it possible for individuals to act in appropriate ways as they develop a basic script of the appropriate action. The behaviour associated with, for example, the event of 'going to a restaurant' will over time be routinised and begin to feel natural for the individual.

People's specific expectations of what will happen when they enter, for example, a restaurant and their role make complex joint activity possible. By involving clients in different situations, coaches can help them develop a sense of the particular event as well as partial knowledge or basic script. Taking clients to a restaurant also means inviting them into a zone of proximal development as coaches can show them 'what to do in this situation' by using themselves as an example of 'how to act'. Jeff describes how he behaves as a coach when going to a restaurant with a client:

*'We ate lunch, and I tested him too: how does he act in a social environment where he is not comfortable? We came to the restaurant, and I tried... because I wanted to place him in the centre of Stockholm at rush hour, when there are lots of people... to see how he was able to interact with other people, queueing, and stuff like that. He kind of froze, and I had to kind of help him by saying, 'Oh, don't you know what food to get? We can choose from this and that, and I am going to go and sit at that table over there, and have you seen the cut-*

lery?’ Jeff speaks in a light and encouraging tone, illustrating the episode. He continues: ‘He was like, “Well, I haven’t seen it yet,”’ Jeff’s voice is now low and insecure as he plays the role of the client. ‘Okay, I will ask someone where it is’ – again in a loud and secure voice – ‘I was the role model, showing him that if you don’t know what to do in this environment, ask someone! But this is not my natural... this is not how I would do it if I were a private person. I would just... because I now have to walk around and be like;’ “OH, THIS IS... OH I DON’T KNOW WHAT FOOD TO GET... AND EXCUSE ME WOULD YOU...” stuff like that. It does not really come naturally to me, but I can do it in specific situations just to... kind of; how do you do stuff in an environment where you haven’t been before? Is it strange to go up to the bar and say: “Hey, where’s the cutlery?” And they go: “It’s over there”, “Okay, thank you. Can I get a coffee afterwards?” and they go: “Well, the coffee is over there”, “Oh, is it free?” and they go: “Yeah, sure”. I know it is free but I will ask anyway just to...’ (interview transcript 2012).

The situation entails a wide range of different emotions and actions the client needs to handle as well as the more specific situated learning of how to act in the situation. He is afraid of being in this particular neighbourhood in Stockholm without his mates from the extremist group he used to be with, as he has been involved in clashes with the extremist left here. He also has to handle his impatience while waiting in line, and he needs to let his thoughts and actions enter the flow of the question of ‘what is going on in the restaurant and how am I supposed to act?’

The coach models his behaviour, as he describes it, for a zone of proximal development to occur. Jeff emphasises that he would not have behaved like this as a private person and that the idea behind the visit is to investigate the client’s reaction to waiting in line with lots of people and to help him ‘become a customer’ in a restaurant in Stockholm by letting him experience and model his actions on Jeff’s. When Jeff realises that the client is freezing, he starts improvising to show the client what to do on the basis of his partial knowledge of ‘going to a restaurant’. He explicates his action by pointing out the artefacts involved and demonstrating how to behave when ‘being a customer’ in a restaurant.

In this way, the visit invites the client to develop as he needs to handle his expectations and his actions and at the same time learn how to enter the flow of the events with hardly any knowledge – which is why he needs guidance in the situation. The coach’s behaviour might become an icon of reflection for the client, as Jeff in this situation can be the mediating device he can use as a heuristic means to improvise from the next time he enters a restaurant (Holland et al. 1998).

Coaches also talk to clients about specific situations to help them develop a broader perception of everyday situations and to become aware of the clients' expectations before involving them in the situation. Clients have been accustomed to a black and white world view with well-defined rules of dos and don'ts, combined with the framing (Snow et al. 1986, Christensen 2009) of modern-day Sweden as a society whose members are possibly enemies to be fought. They have often been discouraged from questioning this perspective on the world since, as mentioned earlier, doing so renders an active extremist right-winger suspicious within the movement. Therefore, clients' basic expectations of how to act in public spaces do not correspond to the basic script, which – for the sake of convenience – can be perceived as shared by average persons. In contrast, clients' expectations towards using public transport might be based on a rudimentary script, in which their narrow norms for acceptable behaviour are used as an unreflective pretext for conflict-seeking interaction with other passengers on the subway.

Since clients are in the process of entering a different figured world with many more nuances than they have been used to, they need to become aware of their own expectations towards others and the reasons behind them. Through discussions with clients about, for example, an upcoming trip on the subway, coaches can help clients enrich their perception of the situations. Jeff explains a dialogue with a client: *'... normalising behaviour, just modelling behaviour, talking about how people interact with each other on the subway and how you should relate to that and saying, "Well, people are idiots, people will be in your way, people will do this and that, people are not as nice as they should be, but you know". But you can't...I am usually...I try to be really polite in public spaces even though I am...I cannot expect that from everyone else. That is a choice I make, and I can't judge people because they don't live up to my standards; they have their own standards. My standards are not universal, and when I start telling that to a client, he goes: "What, what do you mean? If you are nice to someone, they should be nice to you"; "Well, I can't choose that for them"; "That is kind of common sense"; "Well, I kind of agree with you, but you know you have to..."*(interview transcript 2012) .

As mentioned, the coaches are careful not to discuss ideology with the clients. However, through dialogues like the one described above, the coach makes the client aware that reality is not one to one, in the sense that what the client does does not make everybody else do the same or act according to his expectations. Reality is more complex than that, which the coach points out by emphasising that one's own standards are not universal. This is also in an indirect manner to argue against the essence of the Nazi and extremist right wing ideology of a universal standard for all, which they promote as if it once existed

in a utopian golden age that, according to them, has been lost due to globalisation, immigration, multiculturalism or other processes.

Jeff also shows the client how he is part of the context if he chooses to be polite, but that it is his choice. He also makes it clear that the client cannot expect everybody else to act like him.

In dialogue with clients, EXIT's coaches also use the practice of putting things into perspective by giving the clients concrete examples from their own daily lives, as when Jeff continues:

*'...I started talking about when you have different kinds of perspective on things, for example, you like to have a really clean house, and I say: "Well, my girlfriend and I, she likes to clean a lot, and it takes me about two weeks before I see that we need to clean. It takes my girlfriend about two days, so my tolerance for when we need to clean is much higher than hers, which makes her clean more often, and we discuss that, and that is not a problem...". So I try to take that discussion into public transport. Like his tolerance for how you behave towards others is really high, whereas other people's tolerance about how to behave in public spaces may not be as high as his. What are we going to do? Are we going to go out and hit everyone and tell them: "Excuse me, the standard is this high?" We could do that for the rest of our lives, and people would probably not do it anyway, and the only thing that would happen is that he and I would probably go to jail eventually. So we tried to, even though you have thoughts about people and how they correlate to you and... because in his world, everyone else was an idiot that did... that was not as nice as I am...well, no, they are not, but can you expect that from them? Maybe not. "How do you mean?" "Well, people are different, they have different values".'*

Jeff hereby gives the client an example from his own life, dragging the client into a process of reflection, by showing how he negotiates about 'how to do things' with his girlfriend to find a shared standard as well as clarifying why they have different standards for cleaning. He thereby points out how individuals have diverse values, find different things important and perceive things in different ways. This is yet another opposing argument to the black and white agenda of the extremist right and re-enforces Fryshuset's idea of how we can all live together if we develop common standards. Clients need to internalise this approach to others as a means to develop. The coaches also make it clear that it is impossible to try to enforce a universal standard, which would require continuous sanctions that would not make the situation less hopeless, but would also result in them both going to prison.

The argument also shows how a different way of acting in your daily life implies questioning the ideology of the extremist right that clients, to a greater or lesser extent, have promoted and been inspired by. Jeff indirectly exemplifies why the ideological goal of universal standards is an eternal lost cause.



To make clients enter a zone of proximal development, some coaches encourage them to write about their day in a journal according to a model of reflection in order to identify things they feel grateful for as well as things they need help to tackle or apologise for. Then the client and the coach can go through the issues together. Ingrid, in reference to the model, said that several clients had referred to the three words of 'thanks, help and sorry' by asking her: *'How does that string of words go?'* This underlines how the three words become a symbolic mediation for the clients, providing what Holland et al.(1998:38) refer to as a *symbolic bootstrapping*. By helping clients objectify themselves in the context of different actions and incidents during an ordinary day, the words become a tool for clients to gain a better understanding of their perception of the day and their own behaviour and struggles. Objectifying themselves is thus a means for clients to become aware of what they already do so they can change their actions and transform themselves.

The aim of the coaches' different approaches is to encourage clients to become more expert at being socialised into an existing social order (Wertsch, 1998) characterised by different figured worlds. This requires mastering diverse rudimentary scripts in order to feel comfortable and included. From EXIT's perspective, this is decisive for the individual client's further development towards an alternative non-destructive lifestyle and identity.

## Conclusion

For coaches to support clients' development, they need to have undergone a process of disengagement, in which their own narrative of engagement and disengagement has been enriched. Moreover, they must use a deliberate practice for approaching the clients.

Clients need to become engaged in the relationship with their coach and to join new activities if they are to enter into a developmental process that is aimed at creating self-esteem, giving them the courage to participate in activities in diverse milieus and to try out alternative strategies for action. Therefore, coaches need to be aware of the significance of their own past as they need tools and knowledge about how they can make the client enter a zone of proximal development through joint activities and dialogue.

The zone of proximal development present in the different activities in which the clients become engaged through interaction with the coaches comprises the individual steps that can help the clients develop basic scripts, understood as rudimentary indications of action. These can make the clients part of a dif-

ferent figured world than that of the extremist right wing they are seeking to leave.

Even though mentoring schemes are often based on a shared experience between mentors and mentees, or in this case, coaches and clients, a shared past and the desire to help others is, as the examples show, not enough for a successful mentorship to emerge. Having a shared past with the coach may hinder the clients' further development if the past is not used in a reflective way by the coach. In cases such as those described above, good intentions are important, but supporting clients who are struggling with personal narratives of failure and marginalisation as well as issues that are outcomes of their involvement in the extremist right, requires a conscious approach as there are many potential pitfalls.

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# Article 5: Adding a Grey Tone to a Black and White World View – How Role Models and Social Encouragement can lead Former Right-Wing Extremists to Transform Their Identity

This article has been translated to Germany and published in Rieker, Peter (eds.) (2014): *Hilfe zum Ausstieg? Ansätze und Erfahrungen professioneller Angebote zum Ausstieg aus rechtsextremen Szenen*. Weinheim/Basel: Beltz Juventa with the title; ‚Eine schwarz-weiße Weltanschauung durch Grautöne ergänzen. Wie ehemalige Rechtsextremisten durch Vorbilder und soziale Unterstützung zum Wandel ihrer Identität angeregt werden können (Translated for English: ‘Adding a grey tone to a black and white world view – How role models and social encouragement can lead former right-wing extremists to transform their identity’.

**What are the factors which can pave the way for a neo-Nazi who feels ready to leave the White Power Movement behind to develop a new self-understanding? What can enable an understanding which not only prevents the person from moving on to just another criminal network, but transforms him/her into a citizen accepting the rules of democratic society?**

Through an ethnographic, empirically driven analysis, I wish to describe the transformative process involved when members of the White Power Movement in Sweden leave the White Power Movement behind with the support of EXIT. By describing the activities they get engaged in when they become *clients* of EXIT as well as the meaning they ascribe to these activities, I aim to show how social interaction leads the subject into a reinterpretation of him/herself and his/her world view. In this way, I wish to shed light on the kinds of support which seem to help a person struggling to leave an extreme group behind physically, socially and mentally.

The article will deal with the importance of the first meeting and how astonishment can lead to reflection. I will also describe the importance of a shared past between *coach* and *client* by showing how the identification process between the two introduces a role model to the client, which can make the client reinterpret his/her past as a right-wing extremist from a new perspective. The article will also describe how informal dialogue and activities create possibilities for EXIT's clients to develop social skills and experience new emotions, which adds layers to their frame of comprehension, leading them into a new self-understanding. These are factors which all in all make them alter their identity as neo-Nazis, and this, as I argue below, prevents them from further engagement in a criminal and violent career.

Research on racist and extremist right-wing<sup>85</sup> violence in Scandinavia as well as on engagement and disengagement processes has, among other findings, identified a number of push and pull factors working for and against the subject's desire to leave the extreme right behind (Björgo 1997, 2005, 2009, 2011). 'Push' factors are negative social forces and circumstances which make it unattractive to remain in this particular social environment, whereas 'pull' refers to factors attracting the subject to a more rewarding alternative (Björgo 1997, p. 216). While the terms 'push' and 'pull' describe factors which tend to make people leave extremist groups of various kinds, the present study is concerned

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<sup>85</sup> In this article I use the term 'right-wing extremist' as a somewhat broader term than that which describes a member of the White Power Movement, a movement which can also be defined as an extremist right-wing movement as its ideology is a mixture of ideas from National Socialism and The Order. Right-wing extremism is the orientation which has been described by Wilhelm Heitmeyers as 1) an ideology of considering inequality between people as a nature-given principle, and 2) an acceptance of violence as a legitimate form of political action (Björgo 1997, p. 21).

with the next step, when the desire to leave the White Power Movement has led the subjects to take actual action to do so by e.g. contacting EXIT. Based on ethnographic material, I will examine the significance of the reflections and emotions aroused in the subjects as a result of the social interaction they get involved in when they become clients in the organisation. But what do deradicalisation and disengagement mean? Disengagement, deradicalisation and social reintegration cannot be considered out of the context of their precursor, radicalisation. One definition states that radicalisation is a “social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology” (Horgan 2009, p. 152). It is as Kate Barrelle writes:

‘important not to restrict any such definition to one form of ideology, to acknowledge that radicalisation is a process (not an outcome), and that radicals wish to transform the existing social order, often, but not necessarily, using methods that are extreme, anti-social and illegal. It is also important to distinguish between ‘disengagement’ and ‘deradicalisation’, as disengagement refers to a person reducing or ceasing to use extreme methods; this may or may not involve deradicalisation, which requires a change in belief’ (Barell 2010:3).

## The organisation EXIT

EXIT is a Swedish organisation which, in its own words, works to provide support for people who want to leave or have already left *the White Power Movement*. The organisation was started in mid-1998 by a former neo-Nazi who had left the White Power Movement scene several years earlier.

The White Power Movement is an extremist right-wing movement inspired by classical National Socialism and the American supremacist terrorist organisation The Order. The White Power Movement promotes an ideology which considers inequality between people as a nature-given principle and which places the white race as superior. In this perspective, whole categories of people are excluded and considered inferior on the basis of notions of race and culture. Sexual orientation, political affiliation or socio-economic class may also be used as a basis for discrimination (Bjørge 1997, p. 21). With inspiration from classical National Socialism, the movement is highly anti-Semitic and advocates a strong leader to fight against ZOG - Zionist Occupation Government - which according to the movement and inspired by the Order is a Jewish conspiracy which is controlling the world. They recruit people to par-



ticipate in a violent seizure of power through revolution and as part of that struggle, bank robbery and the collection of weapons are necessary<sup>86</sup>.

EXIT sees all the different groups and networks in which their clients have taken part as loosely connected to the cause of The White Power Movement, as they all work towards the same basic goal, i.e. the superior position of the white 'race' as a consequence of the ideology.

The organisation was inspired by the Norwegian EXIT project, which was initiated by preventative police officers and professor Tore Bjørgo of the Norwegian Police University College (PHS) in collaboration with parents and youths who had been members of militant racist groups (2009). Bjørgo's approach to people involved in right-wing extremist groups in Scandinavia is that subjects do not necessarily join such groups because they hold extremist views; they often acquire extremist views because they have joined the groups for other reasons.

But of more immediate importance in the context of this article is the argument in his research that people can be stripped of their radical views as a consequence of having left the group rather than losing such views being a reason for leaving. Thus, people often readjust their system of values to align it with their new pattern of behaviour; this is also EXIT Sweden's approach, as they focus on behaviour as a means to change the subjects' self-understanding and identity and thereby their ideological conviction (Bjørgo 2009, p. 3).

The Swedish organisation was built up with a number of former neo-Nazis in core functions. As the organisation expanded, more and different kinds of employees were needed in order to develop a practice of how to work with what EXIT describes as their *clients* - subjects wanting to disengage from the extreme right and/or deradicalise.

The staff today is a mixture of social workers, academics and ex-members of the White Power Movement as well as former gang members; this brings a variety of competences into play in the organisation's practice. The EXIT staff had fewer clients from the extreme right by the late 1990s, but saw a rise in defectors from well-organised street and motorcycle gangs such as Black Cobra, Hell's Angels, etc. in need of much the same support. The result was that EXIT established a sister organisation called Passus, which now works according to the methods developed in the work of EXIT, but is aimed at gang members. The defectors that Passus deals with come from gangs involved in organised crime and are often at high risk of reprisals when defecting.

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<sup>86</sup> <http://vimeo.com/70379861>

The commonalities between individuals leaving gangs and extreme right-wing groups are that such environments lead participants into a closed sectarian network, with very explicit norms and values that tend to transform the subject into a one-dimensional personality, where one's identity as a gang or group member becomes paramount as gradual isolation in the criminal world leads one into a lifestyle consisting of the same sort of activities at all times. Whereas 'normal' people tend to be involved in a wide variety of activities, which give rise to many different identities according to the different tasks and relations, both kinds of groups often lead their members into a life with a very limited range of identities. Participation in organised crime and right-wing extremist groups also involves the subject in alcohol/drug abuse and violence, together with threats of reprisals from former friends and foes when defecting (Bergström 2012, Bjørge and Horgan 2009).

Today there is a third organisation called CIDES (Centre for Information on Destructive Subcultures) closely linked to EXIT and Passus. All three work with the understanding of groups such as street gangs, the White Power Movement and soccer hooligans as destructive subcultures. EXIT and Passus also work closely with psychiatrists, therapists and others, whose expertise may be needed to assist the clients and their reintegration into mainstream society. The use of the term *client* to describe those who seek help in both EXIT and Passus is with reference to therapy and the psychiatric system and may be seen as rather problematic in that it contrasts with the idea of equality between coach and *client*, on which EXIT's methods are based.

EXIT works directly with a number of subjects who contact the organisation on their own initiative, while others are referred to EXIT by intermediaries like youth workers, police officers, teachers, parents or other family members (Bjørge 2009). EXIT's model for assisting clients is based on a practice where the subject who decides to become a client will be connected to what EXIT terms a *coach*. The coach is an employee who himself has a past within the White Power Movement.

An important basic value for the organisation is not to condemn the client. In their own words, the staff '*condemn the action of the client, but not the person*', thereby introducing a distinction between clients and their actions, which allows for a transformation of the client's identity without merely reducing it to the opposite, i.e. a former neo-Nazi. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore this distinction more deeply as it will be discussed in a future article which will analyse the work with clients seen from the coaches' perspective.

EXIT, Passus and CIDES are located in and are an integral part of a major youth centre called Fryshuset (The Cold Store), a 24,000 square metre building

with nine floors. Fryshuset was founded in 1984 as a result of a joint effort by the Stockholm YMCA and a couple of enthusiasts. At Fryshuset, it is possible to skateboard, play basketball, play music and participate in other leisure time activities as well as in social work and education. The centre also includes various social projects focusing on e.g. children of single mothers, interreligious tolerance, integration and support for children being or feeling alone.

Fryshuset is based on the conviction that encouragement, confidence, responsibility and understanding are necessary in order to enable young people to develop their innate abilities and find their way into society.

Two very central words in the vision for Fryshuset as well as for EXIT, Passus and CIDES are 'passion' and 'exclusion'<sup>87</sup>. In their understanding, exclusion or the feeling of being excluded makes the person vulnerable, which can then make him/her more receptive towards what are described as destructive subcultures.

EXIT's point of departure for their work with clients is that participation in the White Power Movement is seldom a choice based on political conviction, but often a result of a subjective feeling of exclusion and marginalisation in society. This means that, from EXIT's perspective, people's involvement with extremist groups represents a way of being part of a community which includes them, but which also allows them to direct their focus at something else than the often difficult emotions at work inside themselves.

In EXIT's work with the clients, 'passion' is understood as an energy which can lead a person to constructive engagement in life, but can also make the person an enthusiastic member of a street gang or another destructive group or network, depending on his/her needs, desires, possibilities and social circumstances.

A potential client at EXIT will have an initial telephone conversation, followed by a first meeting. In general, two staff members will participate both to secure the staff and more importantly to enable different views when assessing the potential client and how convinced the staff feel about his/her motivation to disengage. The staff will also work on identifying the potential client's needs and resources such as a social network outside the White Power Movement, family relationships, hobbies, education and work experience in order to gain a feeling of how best to cooperate with him/her, but also to estimate potential threats from possible enemies.

Being a client means that one is expected to cooperate, as EXIT's methods are based on cooperation between client and coach. The relation between the

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<sup>87</sup> <http://fryshuset.se/in-english/>

two is based on equality, in the sense that the coach is not understood as a kind of expert working with an object. The relation is rather an intersubjective exchange between two adults (White 2006). EXIT understands the relationship as of core importance in the work with the clients, and a great amount of energy is spent on building trusting relations between coach and client. Trust is of crucial importance for the social interaction leading to the path that can bring about the change in the client's actions that will make him/her reinterpret his/her identity. Trust is built through informal conversations and social activities such as weightlifting, Thai boxing or other physically demanding activities, combined with going to cafés, cinemas, museums, fishing or anything the client expresses an interest in doing.

These activities provide clients with new inputs and experiences, which again will lead them to discover other ways of behaving and to become aware of a wider range of emotions than they may have experienced in previous years when aggression was the dominant feeling for many clients. In the beginning, the client and coach meet or talk on the telephone several times a week. Over time, the client will form new friendships and develop new interests and/or re-establish old friendships or family relationships and often start to re-engage in activities he/she enjoyed prior to participating in the White Power Movement. When these activities and relationships start to have an impact on the client's social life and emotional well-being, the importance of the relations with the coach will diminish, and the client will be regarded as having successfully reintegrated into democratic society. However, at this point, the client is always welcome to call or in other ways stay in touch with the staff at EXIT, which some clients do.

## The study behind this article

This article is a result of a PhD project I am currently working on at the Department of Psychology and Educational Studies at Roskilde University in Denmark. The focus of the study is the meaning of social interaction in the process of disengagement for subjects from right-wing extremist groups. Although it is important to focus on what it means for a person to be a member of an extremist group, it is the exit process which is the topic of the research, and this is often understood as an individual decision. But one can nonetheless ask whether disengagement is also dependent on social interaction. If this is the case, how does interaction lead to disengagement? These are the broader research questions for the PhD which make the relations and interaction between coach and client a central issue and thus the core topic of this article.

Even though many people manage to leave the extremist right without the support of EXIT, it is outside the scope of this study to provide answers as to what might differ between those needing professional help to leave and those leaving without such help from an organisation or similar. That being said, this research does seem to indicate that engaging people struggling to leave the extremist right in activities and social interaction which help them to improve their social skills and enhance their (self)-understandings appears to prevent them from re-engaging in the extreme right as well as in other sorts of criminal gangs and groups.

The data for the project have been generated through fieldwork and qualitative interviews. I stayed at EXIT for two months during 2012, where I followed their everyday practice, participated in two educational sessions for the staff and conducted a total of 21 interviews with staff members and present and former clients.

The process of contacting former and present clients through EXIT influenced whom I have talked to as all the potential informants<sup>88</sup> would talk to one of the staff before talking to me<sup>89</sup>. The informant would therefore be told that I was mainly interested in understanding how they had managed to leave the extreme right behind and what it had meant for them to have (had) the support of EXIT.

This method of access also meant that I did not come to meet anybody who had started on the process and then dropped out completely. One of the client informants had dropped out, but returned to EXIT later on. I cannot tell whether the fact that complete dropouts were excluded led to a positive bias in the interviewees' attitude towards EXIT, but I am aware that the selection process may have prevented them from being critical of the organisation, but may also have positioned me as somebody to be trusted.

Contacting clients through EXIT also provided a body of informants who had participated in a variety of movements, networks or groups, ranging from very organised groups with a well-developed ideology inspired by classical National Socialism, such as Svensk Motståndsrörelse (the Swedish Resistance Movement), through less well-organised, but still ideologically oriented groups, some of which no longer exist, to loosely organised networks and racist gangs

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<sup>88</sup>In anthropology, an informant is understood as the "native" person, who is an indispensable source of information because he/she belongs to the group under examination.

([http://www.denstoredanske.dk/Geografi\\_og\\_historie/Folkeslag/Etnografiske\\_termer/informant](http://www.denstoredanske.dk/Geografi_og_historie/Folkeslag/Etnografiske_termer/informant))

<sup>89</sup> The interview would be conducted in such a way that I spoke English, whereas the interviewee could choose to speak Swedish or English according to preference. I do not speak Swedish, but I understand it perfectly in speech and writing.

with an explicit criminal agenda. Ideology played a role for all the clients, and as adherents to a group defined by ideology, they would - through the feeling of belonging - form an identity as neo-Nazis as well as being positioned as such by others. Ideology thus comes to play an important part for their self-understanding and identity.

In order to understand the shift the client is going through, identity is a crucial factor. In this study, *identity* is understood as the result of a psycho-historical formative process, which develops over a subject's lifetime through his/her engagement in social practice. This makes people develop self-consciousness and self-reflection, and they therefore acquire the ability to take the standpoint of others, as they learn to objectify themselves. The capacity for self-objectification and, through objectification, for self-direction is important in the subjects' capability to create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being. Thus, people are always engaged in forming identities and in producing objectifications of self-understandings that may guide subsequent behaviour. This means that identities are improvised in the flow of activity within specific social situations from the cultural resources at hand (Holland et al. 1998).

Identity combines the intimate subjective world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations, catching subjects in the tensions between past histories that have settled in them and the present discourses and images that attract them or impinge upon them. In this continuous self-fashioning, identities depend upon social support and make at least a modicum of self-direction possible (Ibid p. 4-5).

The clients are engaged in an identity-changing process; therefore, the identification has a central role in the shift that the clients are undergoing, as participation in the White Power Movement makes the subject identify with a group which defines its members by their conviction of an ideology.

Ideologies and their structures may over time come to constitute the cognitive core of the identity of a group and its members and thereby control, to a varying degree, the social practices of the group members, as participants adapt to the ideology in different ways (Bjørge 2009, Van Dijk 1999 <sup>90</sup>). Ideology thus gives the adherent a lens through which he/she understands and interprets the world and him/herself.

The client informants in this study have all been part of a social milieu with an ideology which focuses strongly on *self-identity*, *superiority* of one's own group, and hence on *inequality* (Van Dijk 1995)<sup>91</sup>. Their ideological conviction made

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<sup>90</sup> [http://www.uspceu.com/CNTRGE/RGF\\_DOXA13\\_616.pdf](http://www.uspceu.com/CNTRGE/RGF_DOXA13_616.pdf)

<sup>91</sup> <http://www.discourses.org/OldArticles/Discourse%20analysis%20as%20ideology%20analysis.pdf>

them see themselves as belonging to a superior race and/or culture, while categorising people of darker skin colour as inferior. A common trait in the informants' former conviction would also be to keep Sweden Swedish, meaning that they would oppose immigration, as well as regarding gays as sick people and having a discriminatory attitude towards people receiving social benefits or in other ways being dependent on the state, which would be perceived as equal to being weak. In addition, one of the core enemies in daily life is adherents of the extreme left and AFA (Anti-Fascist Action), an international militant anti-fascist organisation of the extreme left with the declared goal to work against fascism.

Several of the clients that I have interviewed have served time in prison because of their involvement in criminal political activities, violence or other criminality related to supporting themselves and/or their political activities. The present and former clients interviewed ranged in age from their mid-twenties to 40. They had been involved in the White Power Movement from one to 10 years and, in one single case, longer. Some of the informants were still clients when interviewed, whereas others had been clients from four to ten years ago.

Other ways to understand the work of EXIT, their values and norms, their perception of the White Power Movement and their involvement with clients would be generated through participation in EXIT's information activities such as lectures at the Swedish National Police Academy and for the Danish Prison and Probation Service as well as the information material that EXIT produces and receives from similar organisations and screenings on the Internet<sup>92</sup>. Before conducting the interviews, I also read ethnographic descriptions of the extreme right and autobiographies written by former right-wing extremists from Sweden, Germany and the US. This reading enhanced my understanding of the kinds of activities the participants would engage in, the meaning of belonging to such a group and the more emotional aspects of being active in the extreme right as well as of the process leading to disengagement (Egonsson 2012, Sadalin 2010, Widerberg 2001, Persson 2003, Asplund 2000, Arno 2010, Hasselbach 1994, Kimmel 2007, Eiternes and Fangen 2001, Arnstberg and Hällén 2000, Bjørge 2009).

After having now established what EXIT is as an organisation and giving a somewhat brief introduction to the subjective identity and ideological conviction

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<sup>92</sup> [http://www.tv4play.se/program/nyhetsmorgon?video\\_id=2151187](http://www.tv4play.se/program/nyhetsmorgon?video_id=2151187)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jryzn86-1g>  
<http://vimeo.com/70379861>

tion of the EXIT clients, I wish to move on to the essential part of the article by describing in more detail three key elements in the relation between client and coach in EXIT, as seen from the client's perspective. Firstly, I focus on the first encounter between a potential client and EXIT. This then leads to the second element, the analysis of the importance of a shared past between client and coach. Finally, I explore the meaning of social interaction for the client.

## The first encounter with EXIT and the importance of astonishment

The White Power Movement has a political vision of an extreme kind; therefore, it is surprising that ideology was only rarely an explanation of the starting point for the informants' gradual involvement in groups that, in a Swedish context, would position them as neo-Nazis. It seemed rather to be a process of socialisation, where one idea would lead to the next. Both the participant identities as well as the kind of actions they had embraced would reflect the group to which they had belonged.

Through complex and usually long-term processes of socialisation and other forms of social information processing, ideologies are gradually acquired by members of a group (Van Dijk 1995). Several studies also indicate that it is through participation that they become ideologically convinced, not the other way round; this was also the case for the informants in this study (Christensen 2009 A, B, Bjørge 1997, 2009, p. 47).

Through interaction, people incorporate the ideology, which constitutes an evaluation tool by being their frame of understanding and interpretation. As the participant will come to identify more and more with the group over time, he/she will also establish a social identity as e.g. a neo-Nazi. As one becomes isolated as an adherent of the extreme right, the group becomes the most important point of reference, which again reinforces one's identity as an extremist right-winger. In other words, when a particular identity is paramount because of the given social context, the subject thinks, feels and acts on the basis of social group membership, rather than from the perspective of his/her unique personal identity (Barell 2010).

Over time, subjects who have come to perceive and interpret the world through the ideological lens of the White Power Movement will also have a very clear perception of their own identity as reflecting their group affiliation. The ideology postulates a sharp distinction between people, which makes an insider convinced that he/she can easily identify people as inferiors or equals. The very sharp distinction between enemies and friends is part of a black and



white understanding of the world, which also leads the participants into a great deal of conflictual interaction with other groups or individuals. Several of the informants had experienced how they would have certain feelings of aggression before entering the White Power Movement, and how these feelings had become much stronger through participation, making their everyday life full of conflict, aggression and hate towards other people and groups in society. In the interviews, hate would at one point or another be the topic of conversation.

Another experience common to all the informants was that participation had led to a strong increase in the aggression they built up inside themselves. The more aggression they felt, the less room there would be for other emotions, and over time, they would move towards an emotional state consisting of two very dominant feelings: aggression and hate.

Both the present study and Bjørge's research (1997, 2009) on young people in the extreme right in Scandinavia indicate that many members of these groups get involved as a result of difficult social and emotional situations, combined with a sense of exclusion. It seems that participation provides a kind of emotional and social stability, as they acquire a sense of belonging, manageable explanations of a complicated world with complicated relations as well as a clear identity for themselves. This frame of mind, combined with stress, depression, internal turmoil and fear of former friends, are some of the feelings the subjects are struggling with when making their first contact with EXIT.

To leave the extreme right or gang is not easy as it also means losing all one's former friends, who may turn against one, as well as having to start all over again with few skills considered useful in mainstream society. This perspective makes it very demanding emotionally to stop participating.

Therefore, before the first contact with EXIT, most people have spent much time immersed in considerations for and against leaving. A predominant thought before the first contact with EXIT is initiated is the difficulty of imagining a future outside the group, while at the same time continued participation is hardly realistic as the subject has often now reached a point of feeling emotionally burned out. In addition, several informants had also experienced a very real fear of being lonely. A common feeling among people in this situation is the fear of the future, as their involvement in extremist groups has destroyed social relations with family and previous friends, combined with a lack of any idea of what to do with their lives (Bjørge 2009).

A right-wing extremist comes to perceive the world as black and white - us and them - and through this frame of categorisation, the subject is convinced that he/she can readily identify whom to hate and love. EXIT and the people

working there are categorised as objects of hate, being considered to be race traitors or people pretending to have been neo-Nazis, which they never really were, as the story seems to go in the White Power Movement in Sweden, with the aim of discrediting EXIT altogether.

The above-mentioned emotions and frame of interpretation can together make the first visit to EXIT a demanding experience for a potential client. As the quotations below illustrate, the subject can be in a rather chaotic state, since he/she will often have been actively involved in the negative categorisation of the EXIT staff mentioned above and then suddenly becomes someone who needs their help; this is often perceived by the clients as a difficult, shameful and confusing experience, as this man explains:

Johan: *Then I meet Jeff (coach) at EXIT. And you know, when I met him...for many many years, I've been saying, those idiots at EXIT, fucking pigs, fucking communists, fucking Jews, you know, everything. And I was just wondering how is he going to look at me? I'm going to be like a dog with its tail between its legs, I'm going to feel so embarrassed, and then, when I met him, he took us to Stockholm, and you know, he just said hello as if you were a mate. But hang on, there's something wrong here, you must hate me, I've always hated you' and Jeff just arrived: 'We're going to help you', and then everything moved quickly. We got help with housing and protection in Stockholm.*

*I haven't seen him for several years now, but when I met him, I didn't understand that a person who, I haven't got anything against him as a person, but the people, I've hated them for so many years and thought so many stupid thoughts about EXIT Stockholm, and then they stand there with open arms: 'You need help?', THAT made me ... no, wait a minute ... do people like that really exist?' He laughs a little. 'I was so used to you hate me and I hate you and when you hate me, I hate you, too. Here it was like it didn't matter how much I'd hated them, and I was still welcome, and they would help me. It was something new; it was something I had never seen in my whole life!*

Tina: *That must be really confusing?*

Johan: *Yes, I've seen something similar on TV, but that would be acting, but it happens in reality, and I'm very grateful for that.*

The first meeting leads to the first confusion for the clients, which generates a variety of emotions and reflections on the social environment they have been involved in and the norms at work in it. This initial confusion arises because the staff do not behave in accordance with the client's expectations and experience from friends in the White Power Movement nor according to the ways concerned teachers, parents or social workers generally approach people positioned as neo-Nazis; several clients pointed out that they felt these just condemned them and told them what to do. This was often done in what they perceived to be a patronising way with little or no understanding of what was

going on, as the concerned adults would often start arguing for or against e.g. the Nazi ideology.

This reaction is counterproductive in EXIT's experience, as discussions about ideology are a very effective tool to distract attention away from the other more personal problems, which are often an important reason for involvement in such groups and can also, in the initial phase, destroy the chance of establishing a relation of trust between the potential client and EXIT (Bjørge, Halhjem & Knudstad 2001). This is seen in this young woman's story of her first encounter with the employee at EXIT, who would later become her coach:

Tina: *What happened? How was the first meeting?*

Kristin: *Bad, because my father, he's really really... .. Nazis!!!!... For him it's not normal to hate other people just because of race or being gay or whatever. But yeah, we were sitting down, and my dad, he was really like involved trying to make nice conversation and: 'This is good', and Joachim (the coach) was telling me about it and I was just sitting there quiet and so on. I was really against it and no, I don't think I did talk, but I thought about it afterwards. And I thought it's really hard that now you go to a meeting and now you're going to change.*

Tina: *Oh no, that's not the way things work.*

Kristin: *No, so it was a good thing because it made me start thinking that okay, there is a reason why this organisation exists and so on. She continues: He (Joachim) didn't judge me or anything like that when I met him, because I think, you know, my dad was: 'Oh-oh, this is bad and that is bad, and we can't think like this and that' and Joachim wasn't judging me, it was more talking and my dad, that was more: 'Hey, you need to get out of this shit' and if someone says that, it's like: 'No, I'm going to stay in this shit'. It was bad, because he (Joachim) was just talking and then telling me his side and his version and I just listened and then I could make up my own opinion about it.*

In this young woman's words, she was dragged by her father to EXIT with absolutely no intention of leaving the group she was involved in. But even though, as she says, she displayed a really bad attitude, the meeting still made her think about why EXIT exists and that there must be a reason for it. The quote also shows how the woman compares her father's way of speaking (telling her what to do) with Joachim's way of telling her his version and leaving it up to her to conclude from it. Because of the meeting, she gets Joachim's number, which she keeps. She later uses the number as she is assaulted by another group member and feels that he is the only person to turn to, with the result that she becomes a client at EXIT afterwards and stays there for several years.

As a member of an extreme right group, a person seems to get accustomed to being perceived negatively by mainstream society. As the above-mentioned quote illustrates, the opposite also holds true as adherents to the White Power Movement have very specific views on EXIT, which create a certain pre-understanding for the subject who is getting in touch with the organisation. The first meeting breaks with these expectations since the staff do not act according to ways familiar to the subject from the extremist scene. The EXIT employees do not follow the hate agenda and offer to help instead. They listen and talk, but without judging and telling the client what to do. This behaviour, perceived by the subject as astonishing and unusual, reinforces the negative feelings about the White Power Movement that subjects often have at this point as well as the subjects' reflections on themselves, who they are and what they have been involved in.

As this young woman remarks, Joachim is not judging her. Feelings of shame and therefore relief at not feeling judged seem to be of core importance in dealing with former and present participants of the extremist right wing as it is an issue very often mentioned by the clients interviewed for this study, as well as in handbooks about Exit programmes in Scandinavia and other research in the field (Bjørge 2001, 1997, 2005).

## The coach-client relationship and the importance of a shared past

Sympathy is generally important for social relations, but in the relationship between client and coach in EXIT, the fact that the coach had a background in the White Power Movement seems, at least initially, to be of crucial significance for the client. As other disengagement studies indicate, this gives a coach significant credibility and insight, which facilitates the establishment of a good relationship with these kinds of clients (Bjørge 2009), as this present client explains:

*Olav: I got in touch with them (EXIT) because I felt that I needed someone to talk to. It's hard to talk to people who don't understand individuals like me. It's hard to talk to people from the outside, whether they're psychologists, then it's very difficult to talk to them. They don't understand, they aren't inside this world and don't understand what it's like, and how you look at things and how you are as a person. And I think I got in touch with Jeff (a coach) and EXIT and ... because I wanted to talk to someone. I thought that somehow I must get peace, because I know that, each time I reach a certain point...you start getting tired of it, you have no energy to be on the street any more, you have no energy to keep going, you shut yourself inside, but after some time, you are lured back. And I was lured back*

*again and again (he sounds almost tired). And then I thought that if I can get in touch with someone I can talk to, then I don't need to keep the lid on everything that I'm still carrying... to get calmer and then I thought, I'll contact Jeff from EXIT, and he and I, we talked and we met and talked. What's great about him, is that yes, he knows how it is. He's not someone who judges as he's been there himself, he knows himself how difficult it is. He was lured into it via adrenalin kicks, something that makes you feel you're alive, and then he could get me ... first of all, I could get it off my chest and felt how difficult it is, and he gave me a good explanation of why you feel that way, and what he said is in line with how you feel, because he knows where these emotions come from.*

The coaches have been insiders themselves and are still updated about what is going on in the White Power scene and the different expressions of the ideologies at work within it by surfing on the Internet and through other channels. This enables them to engage with the clients without being provoked by their world views or falling into the trap of discussing the moral aspect of the ideology. Conversations where the client feels that the coach really has an intimate knowledge of the White Power Movement seem to make him/her relax and trust the coach. As an insider in not only the White Power Movement, but also closed religious and political groups and movements, one comes to interpret the world according to a particular ideological frame, which may make it difficult to talk to outsiders as they would be unlikely to understand your world view, unlike the coach, who does understand the client's self-understanding and visions for society.

In the client's experience, it is only an insider who can understand his/her perspective and how he/she feels. These feelings of not being understood by others than an insider also show how ideology draws a line between the insider and the outsider of a subculture, as the two will have quite distinct interpretations of the world and appropriate actions (Van Dijk 1995, Christensen 2009 A, B).

The coach is able and willing to meet the client on his/her own terms and to discuss topics from the perspective of an insider. As the coach can switch between the perspectives of an insider and an outsider, he also has the possibility of introducing nuances to the client's world view; this means that he is careful not to oppose the client, but instead adds layers to the client's perspective.

The aim is to help the client move from a one-dimensional narrative to a more nuanced and complex one, making it harder over time to cling to a black and white sort of world view with easy explanations (White 2006). For example, as the quote above illustrates, the desire to feel alive through action and adrenalin kicks may be one interpretation of the reason for participation, which gives the client another perspective than if he/she had interpreted the partici-

pation as a response to a political cause. The introduction of new perspectives seems to lead clients into new interpretations of their participation, which provides them with new ways of reflecting about their own role and identity as right-wing extremists (White 2006).

The coach's conscious positioning of himself as somebody with intimate knowledge of the ideology and what it means to participate also seems to help the client to open up for issues he/she would judge difficult or impossible to share, at least initially, with someone he/she would categorise as an outsider. The experiences of adrenaline rushes connected to conflict-ridden demonstrations, strong emotions of power and of belonging to a group with a common goal as well as the excitement of listening to hard white power music, drinking, etc. are other important aspects that the coaches not only know about, but also know the associated feelings, which they are able to talk about and deconstruct with the clients.

These ways of relating to the clients build a bridge between a world perceived through the ideological frame and the world of culturally shared knowledge in mainstream society, which, as the quote shows, is of crucial importance for the client, as he perceives anybody other than the coach as unable to understand his point of view. This position and capability also gives the coach the credibility needed for the client to listen. As this young woman explains:

*Eva: For me, to have confidence, for me to be able to listen to him, because I've heard, I don't know how many people, who've tried to discuss with me, whom I've just waved away, they haven't been there, because they haven't been in my shoes, they haven't seen what I've seen. So at the outset, for me to be able to like him and to really listen to him at all, it was almost necessary that he had the same background as me, that he could say: 'I've been there, I've walked in your shoes, I've seen what you've seen, I've believed what you believed, and I've heard what you've heard,' it doesn't really change. Thirty years can pass, and they will still say the same things and see things the same way. So for me, in order for me to listen at all it was really important. Because so many social workers, therapists, teachers, parents and relatives have discussed with me, and it has just gone into one ear and out the other, because they haven't been there'. And she says: I can sit and talk with my mother about what I've done and what I think and thought and it ends up by her getting mad at me, or else I can talk to my friends about it now, but they don't understand, they haven't been there and they cannot really get to understand how it is that you become like that and how you come to think those thoughts and behave that way and to think that it's ok. But then, when I came up to EXIT and Joachim and Jeff, those who work there, it felt as if they understood what I meant, and when I said things, it was not like it provoked any kind of shock or reaction or they're just like: 'Oh, this is perfectly normal'.*

The shared knowledge between client and coach reassures the client of not being alone with the experience of participation and the negative sanctions involved. The feeling of having shared the same experiences obviously creates trust, but it also gives the client a sense of not being so abnormal.

Several of the clients were relieved to discover that they were not alone with their problems, which made them feel less abnormal or less of an outsider, a feeling many had had for years. They have been used to disapproval and social sanctions by former friends and family and condemnation by almost the whole of society because of their position as neo-Nazis. When the subject gets in touch with EXIT, it seems that precisely the doubts about continued participation make the subject start to evaluate his/her situation as a neo-Nazi from the perspective of mainstream society. This evaluation often leads to a feeling of hopelessness as well as shame of their actions and beliefs. As the previous quote illustrates, the male client emphasises that the coach cannot judge him as he has been a participant himself. The feeling of shame is related to the 'I judging the I', a self-evaluation where one feels a failure, a feeling which seems to be very familiar to the clients both as one of the many reasons for joining, but also as a result of having been part of the far right (Bergström 2012, Björgero 1997).

The position of the coach as a former neo-Nazi is of vital importance for the above-mentioned reasons, but it is also important for the client as it positions the coach as someone who de facto cannot judge the client, since he has 'been there himself'. This means that the client and the coach, at least in the client's understanding, share the shame. As this guy says:

Tina: *What happened when you got in touch with EXIT? What did it do for you?*

Kalle: *It did quite a lot. I got ... the conversation we had, made me realise that it was not only me who had a problem, but that the others also had had the same problem, then it was easier to talk and tell what had happened, and that meant a lot. We could sit and talk, without me having to feel bad - that was good.*

The fact that the clients would be very explicit about the coach's inability to judge them is in my understanding also an expression of the position of the coach in the eyes of the client. To share the past and thereby the shame is important because it is a sign of having gone through all the same experiences. In this way, the coach knows exactly what kind of emotions are at play as a former member, but he also knows how to leave it all behind since his present status is that of a coach. In that sense, the coach is both the one who knows what it is like as well as living proof of the very real possibility of becoming somebody else than a neo-Nazi.

Through client and coach sharing the experience of being a neo-Nazi, the clients seem to identify strongly with the coaches, which also makes the coach a very positive and inspiring role model, which creates faith in the possibility to change as well as inspiring the client to go through the demanding process of changing his/her lifestyle. As this client says:

Erik: *It was much because of how he is as a person, and as you said before, that if he can manage to stop, then I can, too, and get your mind away from it and live a normal life, bearing in mind that he was much more active than I've ever been. It made me think that he's living a normal life, he has his girlfriend, and he has a child. It was a really important thing to meet him and to see that he'd succeeded. It was a great piece of luck that I went to EXIT.*

## Activities and dialogue: a path to a new vision of oneself

One of the goals of EXIT's work with the client is to make him/her reflect about him/herself in order to change. This reflection is created through dialogue and activities, aimed at enabling the client to develop a new orientation toward him/herself and others. The client will by the mere fact of being involved in EXIT suddenly be in new situations necessitating other ways of interaction than the client has so far been familiar with. To master social situations, in EXIT's view, requires social *skills*, meaning competences which can be learned by anybody, provided that somebody demonstrates how to do it. A social skill is not understood as something that one either can or cannot master as part of one's innate character. To learn how to interact and do things is in their understanding and methods embedded in everyday activities, making it important to do things together, since the person will thereby gain social skill and experiences, which again will lead him/her to new perspectives of him/herself and others (Lave 1996, Lave & Holland 2009, Holland et al. 1998).

Several of the clients had never been to restaurants and museums. Taking the client to such places gives the coach an opportunity to show the client how to manage such a situation, which again allows the client to develop new social skills. These kinds of activities also give the client an example of how a person can, as one client expressed it, '*have a normal relation with somebody without it being based on weird things*'. The activities also let the coach engage in everyday practice with the client, while he also talks about how to cope with various difficulties that could arise in the situation, without using the tools of threats or



harassment when dealing with others, which some clients have been accustomed to using.

By going to museums, weightlifting, playing paintball, etc., client and coach were able to talk in an informal way and avoid a face-to-face interaction, as sitting in front of one another creates a different kind of context for the conversation, making it more intense, as eye contact is expected, as well as making it more difficult to remain silent. All in all, these are factors which tend to make some clients uneasy and veering towards aggression. As one client explained:

Eva: *We go to a museum, and then we go to the cafe, that's what we do. It was relaxing in a way. I was pissed off while doing it, but I think it was really smart, because I could walk around the museum and just talk, you lower your guard in a way, it becomes normal. During that period it was a lot like: Did I actually talk to Joachim? No, I kind of talked to myself really, just out in the open, and he replied a bit, whenever it would fit in, going around in the Asian exhibition at the Museum while talking to myself. I mean, during that period you're like reasoning with yourself, I think.*

Activities are also meant to give the client the confidence that they can manage the situation. Low confidence and self-esteem seem, not only in EXIT, but also in research on members of the extremist right in Scandinavia, to be understood as one of the reasons for joining the White Power Movement, since joining gives a person protection, a sense of belonging and a clear identity (Björge 1997).

EXIT creates opportunities for activities and social interaction between client and coach and provides a situation for talking about everyday practice, where the coach draws on examples from his own life with his family, both to tell how to solve a conflict, but also to be on equal terms with the client in order to reinforce their relationship. The activities have an effect on the clients in both a practical sense (learning how to do things) and equally importantly in giving them self-esteem and inspiring them as to what they can do themselves - without the group - as Eva explains:

*I've been the hidden child in a way, the type you'd be kind of glad to hide away in a room like for example when my mother had friends visiting. Joachim (the coach) was almost the opposite, one of the first things he did was to drag me and this guy to a meeting with the Crime Prevention Council, it was really crazy. In my world, it was just: 'Here I am sitting among a lot of people in suits and people with knowledge'. I've always been really interested in learning things, I think it's really cool and especially education that I've always been like oohh, it's so great and people with education has always been like aahh. And just to sit there and be so well aware of my own lack of knowledge in a way among a lot of people who sit and discuss statistics and know a lot of things.*

*In the beginning it was very difficult to understand why he (Joachim) even took us there, because we weren't a good example of how well things go with new clients. We had barely made any progress, which was obvious when we came in the door. We were after all still fully dressed up, you know, almost in uniforms. But it did something for me, I was quite proud that we could come along, when I actually got there ... you know, what the hell was Joachim thinking about? 'Now we're going to a meeting, I thought that you could come along'. But it was really great, and I was so proud not to be misjudged, first of all that we were in a meeting, me and the 'suits', and then that we weren't something you were ashamed of, because it had always been that way, my mother for example, that you weren't the one you proudly showed off when there were neighbours, it was: 'go and sit in there and stay there, thank you'. That was new, and it also gave me this immediate thought about what you can do, because I was scared shitless to talk in front of people and my idea was: 'No way I'm gonna do this'. But it also made us see what Joachim did besides "playing" with us during the day, and it gave us more respect for him, for it was something I thought I'll never do, to stand in front of a lot of people with good education and discuss a lot of things. It also made us understand that Joachim knew things which we had no idea about and that he had a role in EXIT, which went beyond just being an "uncle" for us, and since then I was inspired by him to do the same in a period of my life. But Joachim is the one who over time has made me understand that there was a potential in me because before EXIT, then there wasn't, or maybe it's been there, but there's just no one who's believed in it.*

Being brought along into a formal meeting with people who in at least this client's view are of a higher standard than herself since they are educated, the client is made to see the coach in a new light - as an example to follow - and is also given the pleasure of discovering that he is not judging her as a person without potential, as first her mother and now she herself have done. The meeting gives her another perspective of the possibilities that are out there - also for her - knowing that the coach has previously been in her situation, and now here he is, talking at the meeting. This is one of many situations that have made this client reflect upon herself, who she is - a person with or without potential, as this suddenly becomes relevant - as well as upon her general possibilities in life. Being in different situations with the coach allows clients to expand their repertoire of social skills as they can copy the coach by interacting with him in everyday practice (Holland & Lave 2009). EXIT is part of Fryshuset; it is thus possible to employ the clients at the centre. This can give the client work experience, which can make it easier to get a job after being a client, but it can also force the client to let go of his/her prejudices which stem from the ideological conviction, as this woman says:

*Kristin: The ideology didn't disappear for me till I actually left the group. Precisely at the beginning and for a long time, I thought there was nothing wrong with the ideology, but that*

*it was the people who were in these environments who had a problem. But then the longer I was working... and especially bearing in mind that I was just HERE to work (we are sitting in Fryshuset) and here there's an incredible amount of people with different ethnicities and different styles of clothes, it was like it wasn't possible to stick to it, while I got to know people. That is, I knew people with different ethnicities and different sexual tendencies and worked with them, and I had to respect them for their professional knowledge and as people and I kind of got to know them and talked to them. It wasn't possible in any way to feel that I ought to be superior to them because of the colour of my skin for example, because many of them were superior to me in knowledge, so it (the ideology) disappeared more and more, and I think actually because I was lucky to be exposed to other people and other ethnicities who work here and who had knowledge, skills, education and life experience that often resembled my own so that you could meet them halfway. It would have been damned hard for me to get beyond the ideological idea, if I hadn't been here and if I hadn't just had these people around me, it's really important, because I cannot go out in the city and just stop the first guy I see and say 'Hey, let's get to know each other.' It wouldn't come naturally to me. But just meeting others was extremely important because, if it hadn't been like that, since the majority of my friends are still of Swedish origin and then it would have been easy, even though I wouldn't show it publicly, to stick to the conviction, making me some kind of closet Nazi.*

The ideological conviction tended to be firmer the longer the client had been in an extremist group. But paradoxically, a firm conviction could also lead a participant to a more serious reading of the Nazi ideology. Several of the interviewed clients had after becoming more convinced Nazis started to evaluate their friends according to the ideology, often with a disappointing result, as they did not act according to the ideological prescriptions. As this client explains, while she was still active, she did not think there was anything wrong with the ideology, but rather with the people surrounding her. She also describes how her anti-Semitic feelings disappeared the moment she stopped being an active member of the extremist group, whereas she felt that other kinds of prejudices had been incorporated into her mindset. As she explains, it was by working with people and through getting to know them that she became aware of her prejudices and realised that it did not make sense to feel superior because of being white, as both her colleagues at Fryshuset whether of dark or white skin colour were her superiors in different spheres of life. That experience led her to recognise that the ideology did not make sense.

EXIT and Fryshuset can provide job training and jobs for their clients, bringing them into situations where they need to go beyond their prejudices in order to fulfil the tasks expected of them in their work. This made this woman reflect on her own ideologically based evaluation of others. The social interac-

tion with many different people at Fryshuset creates new experiences, which again leads the clients into reflections on themselves and their judgments of others. As this former client says, this realisation made her let go of her racist thoughts. This example shows how we are shaped by engaging in the world surrounding us and how social interaction with others can be used as a tool to create reflection, leading to personal change for motivated clients.

## Why interaction is so important

When an active member of the White Power Movement has made an assessment that he/she is unable to reintegrate into society or to see any possibilities outside the group, perhaps combined with criminal skills, it is easy to be convinced that the only possibility is to continue a criminal career in another criminal gang or extremist group once he/she burns out as a neo-Nazi. These are in their eyes the only sorts of environments where they can use their skills and are fully familiar with the scene. Another reason for continuing in another group is the feeling of being absolutely nothing without a group, which for some can be so hard to bear that they will join a group with another outlook, but where the social mechanisms and culture within the group will tend to function according to well-known norms and values. It is therefore of crucial importance to make it clear to subjects involved in criminal and/or extremist groups and subcultures that there are other possibilities in life apart from a criminal lifestyle once they make the initial contact with EXIT (Bergstöm 2012). This might also be one of the reasons why the informants doubted that they could have left the White Power Movement without the support of EXIT. Several of them had tried to leave by withdrawing from the group by themselves, but after a while they would start feeling lonely, often missing friends and action, and would go back, while others had found it hard to avoid contact with the group as the members would keep on asking them to come back or outright threaten them and their family if they did not do so. Well aware of these factors, EXIT works very consciously at conveying to the client that it is possible to make a change and that society is still open for the client.

A common feeling among the clients was a kind of confusion in retrospect about their participation. They did not understand why they had ended up being a convinced member of the White Power Movement. Prior to their involvement, several informants had had friends of Middle Eastern background, and others had family members and adopted siblings of African origin, which made them wonder how they of all people could come to believe in an ideolo-

gy postulating a qualitative difference between people based on skin colour. Through dialogue with the coach, the client gets support to sort out these and other experiences. The coach works with clients to go through their narratives of participation and how they present their story to themselves. One coach explained how his own participation narrative changed as time went by:

Joachim: *Why did I come here? Shifting from the kind of extremist perception of why I went there 'it was because of this and that' to really seeing the whole picture, I searched that movement too, I kind of ... you know to see my role in it, too, I think that was really important and to shift from the neo-Nazi narrative where I would say: 'It was the immigrants that robbed me or bullied me or whatever, and that's why I went in' to seeing the bigger picture: 'Well, that might have been one of the things, but there were a hundred other things that also affected me, and maybe the school with the glasses was the most important thing', to shift from there to here. That is also why I talked to you earlier on about the change of narratives and also the narrative about yourself: 'Why did I come here and what is my role here?' Well, I came here because I want to fight for justice or because...you know, that will change the greater distance you get to the movement, and we can see that very clearly when they come to us. In the beginning they talk about their involvement, this or that, and when they get some distance and help in sorting out their experiences, then they see a totally different picture of why they got involved.*

Today this coach is convinced that, seen in retrospect, one of the many reasons leading him to join the White Power Movement in the 1990s, after spending some time in different groups, was that nobody noticed that he needed glasses until the 9th grade, which made him a failure at school, leading to very low self-esteem. By becoming part of a group believing in the Nazi ideology, he would suddenly become one of the elite by the single fact of being a white male. But one could also argue that identifying the glasses as causing him to be a failure at school fits in well with EXIT's understanding of failure leading to low self-esteem, which again can reinforce feelings of social exclusion.

The coaches in EXIT talk a great deal with the clients about their experiences from the White Power Movement, but also about their reasons for becoming involved with these groups and related emotions. They use methods which can best be described as narrative therapy as, through dialogue with the client, they move from a one-dimensional story about the reason for participation to a many-dimensional one by making the client discover new elements in their story about joining such groups (White 2006). When the clients become involved in EXIT, they work with their narrative of why and how they participated, and as the context has changed since they are no longer in the extremist group, but are interpreting their experiences with the coach, the frame of in-

terpretation has also changed completely, giving the client a new perspective on their story and the reason for joining. This man explains how the dialogue with his coach has made him think:

*Olav: We talked a lot about politics, and in that way, I actually felt that politics is not for me. It's just because we talk a lot about things like that and that it's often much more twisted and deeper than you think it is. It's something that I've learned myself, and then you get tired of all the talk about politics, it wasn't anything he (the coach) said to me, it was just something I realised, that it's more complicated than you think. You're trying to find easy solutions to complicated things, and that's something we talk about, and there you feel that he's very much on my side, but he just thinks and says what to do instead. He understands why, it's not that he says what's right, but he understands why you think that way and what the reason is and where it comes from.*

This client realised that there are no easy explanations and therefore no black and white categories to explain everything. He also emphasised that one of the hardest aspects of the disengagement process was that one needed to think one step ahead as there was no such thing as an easy explanation on societal issues. That knowledge and a better understanding of why the sense of community in the group was of such importance to him have made him calmer and helped him to see things, as he put it, in a broader perspective to the extent that understanding politics as something much more complicated than what he has previously thought even makes him question if politics is something for him at all.

The coach engaging with the clients in activities and dialogue gives the clients a sort of social training, which expands their repertoire of tools to interpret the surrounding society and themselves in ways which enhance their understanding of their overall situation. It appears to be common among clients to have a poor basic understanding of society, political and cultural issues; when they gain a better understanding of other people's situations by e.g. working at Fryshuset or otherwise interacting with others, their understanding of groups and individuals in a societal context also improves, just as they learn other things to do and ways of doing them. Common reasons for leaving extremist and criminal groups are age and family responsibilities (Bjørge 1997, 2009), which also suggests that a more mature perspective may make participation in the extremist right wing appear less attractive.

As mentioned above, low self-esteem is another issue for the clients; this is more difficult to handle than poor knowledge of society, but seems to be one of the most important issues to deal with in order for the client to be able to move on into a non-criminal lifestyle and reintegration into society. This client

explains this clearly when I ask her what the most important things were that EXIT had done for her from an overall perspective:

Eva: *What's been most important, it's really abstract things, it's like this: EXIT has given me back my self-esteem, EXIT has taught me to like myself, which I didn't do before, and to see the potential that I can do things, that I'm not worthless, that I do have something to offer. In practical terms, they gave me a work placement, which ended in a permanent job, and to get a chance to try to work and to feel that you are of use. Joachim especially gave me a lot of support through conversations, not that you sit in the office and talk about things, we went to museums, we went to the cinema to feel ... because this is the thing: that therapists, counsellors and social workers sit in little offices and talk about so many things, but we've (her and her former friends) never had a normal friendship which hasn't been based on strange things, but he (the coach) gave me that in a professional manner, well, he was working, but he gave me a chance to see how it should be and that all these destructive things shouldn't be involved in it, we had a relationship in a normal way, and then the fact that they do understand'* (Interview transcript 2012).

As the client says, her relationship with the coach gives her the chance to discover things, relations and social interaction in other ways than before. The interaction with the coach introduces her to new norms, how people can be together as friends and new feelings of the friendship - being understood and supported also when vulnerable - as most clients were used to hiding difficult emotions from their former friends and themselves by redirecting the feelings into aggression or hate when problems arose. The quote shows that when coaches do things together with the clients, the clients get involved in practical situations, through which they can acquire social skills and also learn that they can transform their identities in other and more rewarding ways than their experiences have taught them so far. This client learns by getting the chance to work that she can fulfil tasks, she can be trusted and she is of value for other people. Engaging clients in practical tasks provides them with a context-bound practice, through which they can experience themselves in a new perspective (Lave 1996, Holland et al. 1998).

## Conclusion

Engagement in, and disengagement from, destructive groups seems to be a question of participation. What subjects participate in is crucial as it seems necessary to participate in order to become an ideologically convinced right-wing extremist, whereas participation in everyday activities which differ from what one normally does can pave the way for a change of self-understanding or identity. By listening to what former and present clients of EXIT tell us, it

seems that interaction with significant others can make motivated subjects exceed their previous experiences, giving them new perspectives and ways of understanding themselves and those around them. To disengage from the extremist right wing seems to be possible by involving the subject in learning methods embedded in everyday practice and through a non-judgmental dialogue, in order to give the client new social tools as well as experiences leading to higher self-esteem. It seems likely that, by developing the subjects' social skills and letting them realise that they can still reintegrate into society, the motivation for change is reinforced. Furthermore, in order to support a subject in a transformative process from an extremist environment, it appears important not only to convey an idea of the value of reflection, but also of the actual tools of how to reflect, to enable the subject to interpret him/herself and his/her surroundings; this may be not only a way to help right-wing extremists to disengage, but may also prevent them from moving on to other extremist groups or criminal gangs.



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# Article 6: The Continuous Struggle of Becoming... Somebody – Former Right-Wing Extremists' continued Process of Self-transformation and Social Re-positioning after an Exit Programme

## **Abstract**

Individuals' participation in activities associated with cultural-defined worlds makes them develop sensitivities and sensibilities which enable them to engage in social actions, gain a position and develop a correlated identity. But how do individuals coordinate with others and handle themselves when they are informed by a horizon of meaning they no longer identify with, without much idea of alternative worlds in which to become engaged? This is the subject of the present article as, with inspiration from social practice theory, its aim is to discuss the challenges involved in an identity formation process, which individuals who have left extremist right-wing groups go through, during, and especially after, an exit scheme. These individuals struggle with not knowing who to become, combined with heavy stigmatisation from mainstream society for having been part of, and identified with, the neo-Nazi cause.

**Keywords:** Identity formation processes, cultural-historical school, right-wing extremist, agency, disengagement.

## The continuous struggle of be-coming...somebody—Former right-wing extremists' continued process of self-transformation and social re-positioning after an exit programme

Eva: *'I think it's very important to understand how much the one leaving the group has invested in it, for that's what people do not seem to understand. I did not just leave a group; I left an entire life, I left my views, I left my friends, or what I, moreover, had come to see as my family. They were the ones I could do anything with; at least, I think so. I left a whole lifestyle! I may have developed a lifestyle that did not work in any other context than in the group, really, a way of being, a behaviour, a way of supporting myself which could not work afterwards. And you have invested a number of years in it, be it two years or ten, then you have still invested quite a large part of your life in it, and then it remains important to understand that: it's a bit like leaving oneself. So, for someone to leave such a group is as if Svensson<sup>93</sup> would have to pack his bags and leave his wife, children and house to go to Tunisia to live in a tent. That's almost as likely! It's not something you just do in a jiffy, and it's not easy.'* (interview transcript 2013<sup>94</sup>)

As is obvious from the quote<sup>95</sup>, it is a complicated process to leave a group on the extremist right, as Eva did ten years ago, and subsequently develop a different identity. When Eva decided to leave, she had a self-understanding and identity that were relevant to the world of the extremist right, in which she

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<sup>93</sup> Svensson is a typical Swedish surname, but in this context it is used as slang to convey an image of a sort of average middle class Swedish person, working from 8 to 5 with 2 children, a wife, a villa and a Volvo.

<sup>94</sup> This article is a result of a PhD project at the Department of Psychology and Educational Studies at Roskilde University in Denmark. I have carried out two months of fieldwork at EXIT. EXIT is a Swedish organisation that supports people motivated to leave the extremist right by connecting them to a coach (who is himself a former neo-Nazi). The aim of EXIT and the coach's support is to help former right-wing extremists alter their self-understanding and identity in order to reintegrate into society (Christensen 2014 in review). EXIT is part of a large youth centre, 'Fryshuset'. In 2012, I stayed at EXIT for two months and conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with staff as well as former and present clients – EXIT's term for individuals in the disengagement process. I spoke English, whereas informants could choose if they wanted to speak English or Swedish, as I understand both languages.

<sup>95</sup> The people in this study have been active in the extremist right from the 1990s and onwards. Some have left recently, while others disengaged up to ten years ago. They have all been supported by EXIT. EXIT uses therapeutic dialogues and activities to support them in developing alternative world views and a self-understanding and identity. The organisation's primary support of people is to connect them with a coach.

had by then been involved for several years. Her identity during her years as a member made her orchestrate aspects of her history in person and organise her identity according to a complex ground of sentiments, sensibilities, feelings, skills and practical knowledge (Holland et al. 1998), developed through her engagement in a neo-Nazi group, allowing her to act as a right-wing extremist in Sweden<sup>96</sup>. As Eva points out, people invest themselves in worlds in which they participate in order to become somebody. Self-identification and self-investment are crucial for everybody in order to become a particular kind of actor in one or more symbolic worlds (ibid).

The identity formation is linked to a symbolic world which requires individual agency to control oneself to be able to coordinate with others (Ibid). Individuals can learn to ignore aspects of situations to which they would previously have responded. They can master their history of - in this case - having been a right-wing extremist, but the process involves effort, and there is still no guarantee of success (p. 38).

The aim of the article is to investigate how individuals coordinate with others and handle themselves - as Eva points out in the quote - when they are mainly informed by a horizon of meaning they no longer identify with and are still without much idea of alternative worlds to become engaged in. It also focuses on what it is that renders the process of altering one's identity so complicated; and what the personal consequences are for people struggling with the feeling of who they are, but without knowing who they want to become.

Based on a practical theoretical approach, the article discusses the difficulties connected to an identity formation process, which becomes accentuated due to the sectarian nature of the extremist right wing, as people involved in the extremist right tend to perceive the world as black and white, making individuals in the process of leaving it struggle to re-contextualise their world view in order to develop a sense - and direction - of who to become.

The first part of the article discusses the disintegration of a personal world view and what it means to be in between different worlds in respect of cultural definition, or figured worlds;

‘...a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others.’ (Holland et al. 1998:52),

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<sup>96</sup> I use the terms 'right-wing extremist' and 'neo-Nazi' as synonyms, although I am aware that not all right-wing extremists are neo-Nazis, whereas all neo-Nazis are right-wing extremists.

the argument being that a lack of sensitivities towards the world in which one acts reduces the individuals to neophytes and leaves them without any sensibilities towards the situations in which they engage, thus making them insecure. The article then argues how navigation in social life is a challenge; when you cannot react in habitual ways and continue to have to struggle with both the Nazism stigma and that people in everyday life – unreflectively – tend to react to a person with an ambiguous identity. The article then debates the personal implications of having a criminal and stigmatised past to finally conclude what issues are at stake for peoples' reintegration into society – with a criminal and extremist experience as part of their lived identity.

## The individual's initial questioning of an unambiguous identity

One's self-perception and identity formation is a never-ending process. Yet, especially the first time after the individual's reflective desire to leave an extremist group as well as the years after having left it are very confusing and demanding. Individuals who join extremist right-wing groups experience two parallel and mutually reinforcing processes: inclusion and socialisation into withdrawn and stigmatised communities and severance of ties with the 'normal' community (Bjørge 2009:33), since the fact of being associated with a neo-Nazi group is enough to become stigmatised by friends, family and society at large, making the thought of leaving all the more anxiety-provoking. Through immersion in the everyday practice of this sort of symbolic world, people – right-wing extremist or not – form bodily and mental dispositions relevant to it. By developing such dispositions, they are enabled to be participants in activities where their behaviour is informed, not determined, by the particular figured world as a horizon of meaning (Holland 2010: 270-271). Several of the individuals interviewed during this research were aware how, at a given point in time of their engagement, they started changing their hairstyle and way of dressing. They perceived this change as an expression of their identification with the right-wing extremist group which they had joined at the time. Yet, their identification with the horizon of meaning<sup>97</sup> against which they came to interpret themselves and others occurred over time and without their reflective awareness (Holland et al. 1998:140).

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<sup>97</sup> The horizon of meaning would include rejection of liberal democracy and equality and tolerance by considering inequality between people as a nature-given principle. The ideologie(s) on the extremist right advocate violence as a legitimate means to pursue political goals and promote the use of non-democratic means such as threats, harassments and violence against political opponents and others perceived as of inferior status.

It was not until the deliberate desire to leave the group and start the process of personal transformation that their social positions as (former) right-wing extremists became a conscious matter and indeed concern. Eva's process of dropping out of the extremist right-wing environment (see quotation above) was instigated by spending time in custody, in isolation. This was the first time for a long time that she had been alone with her own thoughts, making her wonder how she had reached the point of being incarcerated with a very serious preliminary charge against her, in her early twenties.

As Eva's statement indicates, people engage in activities associated with a culturally defined world, become familiar with it and learn its meanings to the extent that they take it for granted, without questioning it. This makes them attuned to certain types of people and actions relevant to that world as these actions have meaning with references to its horizon of meaning. They develop sensitivities and sensibilities that automate coordination with other participants, facilitating their ability to engage in social actions relevant to that world - or in Bourdieu's words, they develop a sense for the game (Holland 2010: 270 - 271). The figured world of the extremist right wing became, as Eva pointed out (see quotation), an aspect of her history in person, and in every sense, she came to personify that world by her way of acting, looking and perceiving herself and society.

The extremist right is based on a black and white mindset, which seems to offer the possibility for the individual to metaphorically 'take on' or 'step into' a pre-established role or identity he or she 'just' has to fulfil<sup>98</sup>. The position as a neo-Nazi offers an explicit relation to others in society as it is the most stigmatised identity in mainstream society one can possibly have, creating an almost immediate isolation from family and friends. The isolation, but also the unambiguous identity might be one of the reasons why Eva and others emphasise the difficulties involved in leaving the extremist right behind, because, as she said, *'Everything was so obvious, who I was and who I ought to be and what the meaning of my life was.'* (interview transcript 2013).

When Eva realised that she could not go on any longer, she got in touch with EXIT soon after, a connection which started Eva's process of disengagement with a huge impact upon her perception of herself and others, the focus of the next paragraph.

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<sup>98</sup> In this sense, the extremist right-wing worlds engaged participants in an identification process similar to religious movements and groups (Christensen 2010, Barelle (2010)).



## The disintegration of a personal world view

EXIT and the coaches' support of former right-wing extremists entails, for example, the contextualisation of the former world view, as the people involved in the extremist right become accustomed to a certain way of thinking, notions of a conspiracy against society as well as believing that all people outside the group are enemies to be fought, and they have also developed particular ways of acting (Lodenious 2014 in Christensen 2014 B in review).

After having been immersed in the extremist right, people have become used to acting according to unquestioned assumptions as, according to staff at EXIT, doubts and questions in general are discouraged, making participants develop a similar outlook – at least in the points of view that they pronounce publicly.

When Eva got in touch with EXIT, it soon had an impact on her perception of the world and herself. She recounts: *'You learn to close your mind by classifying others as inferior (when you are active on the extremist right wing), and since they are inferior, we do not need to feel sorry for them: as you cannot compare yourself with me! That's why, for example, some people refer to Islam as AIDS, or you refer to them as animals and stuff. And that's what makes you unempathetic as they are not on a par with me and my friends. But when you start getting back to that, all people are of equal value ... especially when I had been a lot at EXIT...they challenged my prejudices about immigrants, and I began to understand this about socio-economic status and the significance of living in certain places and not be integrated - how hopeless it all then becomes.'* (interview transcript 2013).

As Eva is a newcomer in another figured world - the EXIT world - which is part of Fryshuset, a youth centre in Stockholm (Christensen 2014 in review) – she is in unfamiliar surroundings, operating according to an alternatively socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation. As none of the staff at EXIT would refer to other people as inferior, they indirectly question what Eva takes for granted. Eva experiences how people around her do not classify others in a hierarchy, but rather contextualise them and their situation – the significance of living in deprived areas, marginalisation, etc. She is introduced to alternative perceptions of people and explanations of societal issues, which gives her additional perspectives on others, their situations and her own. Initially, Eva continued to see her former friends from the extremist right wing while she was engaged at EXIT, which proved to be difficult, as she says: *To sit at home with my friends when they launch their usual talk, I almost felt it tickle in my tongue to repeat, but I'd started realising and I knew I could not do it; it would just become nonsense...Even though I knew, it was not good for me, but when it had been hard,*

*they (friends on the extremist right) had been there for me, and although they were no good, they had their problems. But they were the ones who had put up with me when it was hard, for example, when I had to move who then collected the furniture... In a way, it is like saying that I cannot keep them, because they are not ready to handle themselves, and I cannot fix my life with them, for they will almost just drag me down.'* (interview transcript 2013).

At EXIT, Eva is introduced to additional information on immigrants and social issues, but defined and understood with references to a different horizon of meaning than the one she is accustomed to. This is why she starts questioning her own perceptions. This makes her unable to agree with the ones she normally identifies with. Eva seems to be aware that the interaction with people at EXIT adds to her perception of things, which also makes her realise that, in the way that she is affected by EXIT, she has likewise been affected by her friends' talk and way of acting. This potentially makes her conclude that, in order to change herself, she needs to change her social environment.

When people can no longer identify with their usual associates, they may also start to question who they are themselves, which brings about a sense of loss of belonging and loneliness. Eva no longer fully identifies with her friends, as she is in between several figured worlds, without fully identifying with any one of them. She realises the huge difficulties involved, as she points out below that she has never felt more confused in her life, emphasising the importance of peers in people's development of self-understanding and in forming figured worlds in which to act and to become somebody.

Part of the confusion is also a result of EXIT coaches' use of specific techniques in their dialogue with the clients (Christensen 2015 in review) to support them in drawing their own conclusion, as Eva relates; *'The thing was that I was so used to people trying to help me, the social service and stuff, that they told me what was wrong, while Joachim (Eva's coach at EXIT) taught me to tell myself. In the sense that we talked, and instead of him expressing it for me, that I was impossible and contrary, then it was me who came up with it and told him what it was I found annoying. They call it 'the Motivational Dialogue' and just that I had to form the idea myself; that what happened around me was not okay, and I had to find out myself what was wrong and even see the flaws... I was never angry with him when he was there, but I could be really furious with him when he wasn't, because he disturbed my world a bit all the time, and I was pissed off by it.'* (interview transcript 2012).

Joachim does not tell Eva what is right or wrong in their dialogues, rather he helps her identify it herself, making it much harder for her to push the new insights aside. At the same time, Joachim represents a different world – and does not confirm her views. On the contrary, he introduced her to alternative

perspectives by pointing out different signs of significance, providing her with additional information, bit by bit, which makes her draw different conclusions than her usual ones.

Eva at this point does not share his figured world, but is just on the brink of knowing it, which leaves her in limbo. As she lacks the tools to act in it as well as the understanding of the figured world of Fryshuset and EXIT, it is difficult for her to identify with it and start the process of investing herself in an alternative position (Holland 1998) than the one she has had on the extremist right wing, which she has started to question, almost reluctantly.

This is a stressful situation, as by being in a different figured world with which they do not identify, individuals are pushed to question previously unquestioned, collectively approved truths they have so far taken for granted. Eva is, as she says; *'pissed off with Joachim for disturbing her, by questioning her perception and by making her add nuances to it' - herself -, exposing the flaws'* (interview transcript 2013), as she says, which again kindles her desire to leave the extremist right. Eva continues by emphasising how demanding it is to be in a liminal phase (Turner 1968), the phase where the individuals are in between things as their previous perception of themselves and others has been dissolved, and a new perception and identity has not yet been established. Eva says, *'It has probably been the most chaotic part of my life, really, also because it was up and down. I couldn't ignore the fact that I could come from Joachim, where I had formulated a thing about, let's say, hypocrisy, and even have explained to him the damned hypocrisy of it all. And then I came home, and I would almost be desperate to remove it from my head, and occasionally I succeeded. Because it is a huge step to take ...even in brief snatches.'* (interview transcript 2013).

In the beginning, Eva has managed to ignore some of the insight she has gained from discussing with Joachim. She feels that she is in a state of chaos as there is no longer a frame of interpretation that makes it obvious to her who she is and ought to be, something which had seemed so obvious previously, when she was a right-wing extremist.

She is now experiencing a very different feeling of pure chaos and is in search of a new way to figure herself. As the extremist right is linked to a one-dimensional world view, a lot of nuances disappear, which might be one of the reasons why Eva and others feel that it is obvious what kind of actors the individuals can become and are indeed expected to be when they are active. Eva is now in the middle, being introduced to different worlds with many more nuances, and she is also influenced by alternative angles of interpretation of the worlds. The insecurity and Eva's uncertainty as to which perspective from which to interpret or indeed evaluate herself and others, also make it

hard to find out what kind of actions that are required to obtain an approved position in an alternative figured world.

As Eva spent time with both the staff at EXIT, but also her friends, she felt that she accommodated both. Yet, she felt that, as EXIT invested so much in her, she could not let them down. This is also a sign of her having started a process of devoting herself to their world as she has come to care about their perception of her, which also made it impossible for her to let them down, as she explained. Eva's feeling reveals that she has started developing a sense of what counts in the coaches' world, which is also a sign of loyalty to the coach and thus a relationship with him in particular, as a person which brings about and reinforces her engagement in the figured world of Fryshuset and EXIT as such.

Eva also experiences a different kind of emotional relationship with Joachim as she realises that she could talk to him about her difficult situation at home. She experiences that, even when she is sad, she does not have to, as she says, *'keep a straight face, since everybody has problems and feels bad, but at EXIT, I did not need to keep up the façade.'* (interview transcript 2013). Eva's meeting with Joachim, EXIT and Fryshuset introduces her to an alternative realm of interpretation as they are based on different norms, values and meaning. By being in a different world than the one she has been used to, Eva also obtains a standard for comparison. This makes her question further what she has so far taken for granted. A new standard also makes Eva - and anybody else on the brink of leaving the figured world of the extremist right - become a neophyte.

People need to feel drawn to becoming active participants in different activities to develop sensitivities and sensibilities, which will help make their behaviour informed by the new and alternative figured world; since they are required to develop different social skills and ways of acting to obtain a position in that world, which at a later stage becomes dispositions - elements that finally shape an alternative identity (Holland 2010, p. 271). But how to develop a disposition in different figured worlds? This is the subject of the next part of the article.

## Who am I? What do I like? To give up on artefacts and of positional identity

Participants in groups on the extremist right have developed a particular dress code, posture, particular habits and dispositions by their immersion in the groups and their activities. The individual's action also became informed by a desire to perform and validate the claims to the identity as a right-wing ex-

tremist. And, as mentioned above, the external expressions of identification with this social category position the individuals in relation to others. From an overall perspective, relational identities have to do with style and behaviour as indexical of claims to social categories and thus relationships with others (Holland et al. 1998: 127-128, Holland 2010).

The position as a neo-Nazi can be perceived as a claim to power, among other things, because being part of a group recognised as violent in mainstream society will influence how people - who are not part of the category - in general react to it and its members. For many of the informants, the development of (positional) identities as neo-Nazis happened without their being aware of it. Their reflective desire to retransform themselves and their course of retransforming themselves subjected them to a demanding process, involving all aspects of them and their lives. Joachim - a coach at EXIT - describes the complete loss of identity many of his former clients have experienced during the process by using an example from one of his clients, whom he quotes:

*'When I left it, this closed environment that had affected me incredibly intensely during all these years, I wondered who I was. What music do I like? Because I've groomed that White Power music is the best, but what do I really like? Have I ever listened carefully to jazz or hip-hop? Have I listened to it? No, and then to try somehow to get back to it. Which style do I like? Which clothes? I have always been wearing black military clothing, but what do I really like? What films do I like? All this, literature, everything associated with my identity. WHO AM I? ... When you leave the environment, who am I really? And who am I in relation to others when it is not about intimidation and fear, who am I, and how should I behave?'* (transcript from a lecture 2013).

A personal change of this nature involves a deliberate desire to no longer participate in activities linked with the particular figured world of the extremist right. Through participation, members have learned to perceive certain objects and actors as being above others as figured worlds are evoked by both symbolic and material signs of significance. Symbols such as tattoos, flags, stickers and clothes are among the first things to be taken away by the individual in this transformative process. Members have personalised the figured world of the extremist right through the way they had dressed, the music they had listened to and the political agenda with which they had come to be identifying with.

These indicators are a result of what Holland et al. (1998) term a *lived identity*, entailing - which Joachim describes, see the quotation - a sense of one's interests and feelings, one's active self-expressions related to those interests as well as points of view. Yet of greater importance are the dispositions following a lived identity as it directs the individual attention and agency, as it encom-

passes having a sense of what sort of actor one is or - as Bourdieu (1977, 1990) stated - an unarticulated "gut" sense of one's standing in social interactions (in Holland et al. 1998). When the individual starts reflecting about him or herself and his or her life, they also come to realise at some point that, without leaving the present life behind, it becomes impossible to change one's life and thus oneself. Then there is, as Eva pointed out at the top, not much left to act upon, making the individual experience a loss of direction at some stages during the process.

Several of EXIT's former clients have undergone a radical transformation of their perception of themselves, their world view and the associated position in society. But who they are today is still a result of their improvisation on sediments from past experiences, but now as participants in other figured worlds constituted by a different horizon of meaning, which has an impact on their interpretation of their actions and their reasons for them.

Many of the informants<sup>99</sup> for this study continued to listen to the same sort of music, for example, but with different lyrics than those of the White Power music. Others continued to work out and lift weights, but now in order to keep some discipline in their daily lives, whereas before they did it to develop strength to protect themselves as well as to gain positions. Some also keep a rather similar style of dress, but stripped of any references to the extremist right and now followed by a reflective awareness of displaying politeness and friendliness towards people around them.

The extremist right wing can also be perceived as offering participants a one-sided world with a political agenda that both defines the world and the individuals' direction. As the persons interviewed explained, the struggle for a higher political goal had an impact on their actions, and especially the feeling of having a higher meaning in their lives. Leaving the extremist right therefore also means the loss of a fixed goal, the loss of position (social and economic) and a sudden need for many more competences as they will – whether they want to or not - become part of a society consisting of many different figured worlds that they encounter several times a day, requiring different social skills. The world will never again become as homogeneous with regard to which kind of actors they are as they will need to develop many more skills in order to perform in the many different everyday activities linked to different figured worlds.

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<sup>99</sup> In anthropology, an informant is understood as the "native" person, who is an indispensable source of information because he/she belongs to the group under examination and is thus regarded as a representative of the group and its views. Yet, with a clear understanding of the individual nuances involved when interviewing a person, this is why anthropologists often interview several people and do field observation (Hylland-Eriksen 1998).

## How to react when I cannot act as I am inclined to

EXIT makes their clients participate in diverse activities in order to help them develop rudimentary sensitivities towards the unspoken norms of social life to help them identify with different figured worlds. One of the outcomes of the coaches' interaction - and activities with the clients, is that these come to constitute a sort of mediating device in a Vygotskian sense, which is a tool for reflection constructed by assigning meaning to an object or behaviour as it develops within a locus of social activity (Holland et al. 1998). Coaches introduce clients to 'ways of acting' by, for example, visiting museums together, cafés, cinemas and the like so that the clients can sort of copy the coaches' actions in some way and use their example as a mediating device for further improvisation and development of their actions in future similar situations (Christensen 2015 in review).

The individual who is developing alternative emotions struggles, especially in the beginning, with the establishment of a basic feeling of who he/she is as well as insecurity as to how she or he is supposed to (re)act in a given situation.

History in person with its sediments from previous experiences, in this case, often entails conflicting emotions and leaves the individual in a confused state. How are the individuals going to act when they are leaving an identity rather than having one? When their disposition gives them impulses that they can no longer respond to as they try to enter a different world. As Eva explains:

*'I think the thing was that, when I came out (of the extremist right wing), I was an adult, and this thing about grey areas - compromises - for example, to try to see both sides of the coin - but it just took so MUCH damned time (to get to that point). And it might be what made it so turmoil-ish with me in the beginning when I left, especially in my personal life, to try to find out about all these things; that I knew who I was, but I did not know who I should be and how to learn it, and I can still feel confused; WHAT DO I DO NOW? Well, it has to do with having an instinct, but you also know somewhere that the instincts I get about how to behave, it is not like you ought to behave if you ought to consider how society perceives it. Because I often feel like ... I am in such a way that if I get mad, I can get really mad, and I realise that now I am very angry about a tiny little thing, and I need to back off. But I am still beside myself with rage over things, for example I will be furious at someone, and then I must just try to back off and say; 'I'm very sorry, I know I overreacted'. But the fact is that it is not all natural, and it may well be that it will never be in such a way that it becomes natural to think twice and see...'* (interview transcript 2013).

Identity formation entails a form of self-organisation, and in the beginning, Eva is dependent on social support from her coach Joachim, for example, to be able to perform in different situations. Yet, as she is recounting, it can still be frustrating for her today – ten years after - to be unable to follow her inclinations, as she then becomes confused about how she is supposed to react. The quote could be interpreted as a sign of Eva 'just' acting as if she has changed, as she says, she has to control herself and does not at all feel that it is natural to back off when she gets angry. Yet today, Eva feels it is appropriate to excuse herself for her anger, because she has become aware and feels that it is not fair towards others, which both her perception of the extremist right as hypocritical, which originally reinforced her motivation to change, and her dialogue and interaction with Joachim made her understand.

Eva has since then changed her life course and political convictions dramatically; she has started an education and has a job. She has, in other words, finally entered different figured worlds, in which she has invested herself, because people's perception of her in these worlds matters. Eva therefore controls herself as the constraints in these worlds are that she cannot win an argument through aggression, she will rather be sanctioned and expelled if she does not 'back off', as she says. Eva is still struggling with her temper, which can make her furious to the extent that she feels she will relapse into her old behaviour, which she finds unacceptable by now – and which will inevitably lead to her losing face in others' perception of her, as others will position her socially by drawing on the resources of the figured worlds in which she is now acting.

Eva's example shows the outcome of her investment in different figured worlds in which she has come to identify herself. This is further exemplified by a coach at EXIT and Passus, who had previously been a member of a gang for many years. He explains about his use of what he now perceives as unacceptable methods as he now judges them from a different standpoint, being informed, as he is, by another frame of interpretation. He says:

*Through the support of Passus – EXIT's sister organisation, based on the same approaches, but aimed at former gang members (Christensen 2015 in review) – 'I have learned to handle this with the authorities in a wholly different way and to have a different kind of relationship with them. I think that the way I reasoned before, I had like a violence capital or threats or other tools that were indecent, and which I got a kind of confirmation or sense of power out of using. They do not really fit if you are to be a responsible parent. It had to change, and I realised that I have a lot of things - in the sense that he has to deal with a lot of things about his behaviour, perceptions, etc. - and it's going to take a long time. And it was also very frustrating to realise how much I have harmed my children's lives, and I have struggled to face up to the fact that one thing is that I*



*bad chosen the wrong things in life, but also to have to realise that I have harmed my children..'* (interview transcript 2013)

Through his work as a coach and by his present positioning of himself as a responsible father, Gunnar no longer perceives his former methods as legitimate, interpreted with reference to the figured world of family life, EXIT and Passus. He is - like Eva - in a continuous process of altering his way of approaching others in association with his progressive transformation of his identity from a gang member to his new positioning of himself. Gunnar is at the beginning of a long process of developing sensitivities and sensibilities towards these worlds.

Both Gunnar and Eva are in a continuous process of changing their lives. Yet some parts of a previous life as high-ranking gang or extremist group members can be impossible to let go of, as the individual possesses knowledge that they have agreed to keep secret from anybody outside these groups. To keep promises of not discussing any concrete part of your life in the gang is a question of life and death as it can be part of a gang's acceptance of the individual's disengagement. This also implies the impossibility for an individual of fully discussing aspects of their participation, which might hinder the processing of traumas, which for many is part of their development of a different identity. It also requires that the individual is very aware of what he/she says about their previous life, which emphasises how the individual in some respects will always need to act according to the rules set by the gang or extremist group in order to feel safe and stay alive.

But even years after a disengagement process, life entails a challenge as the individuals have a dramatic standard of reference which tends to make everyday life appear boring and meaningless, in comparison to their previous lifestyle. Because the individual is no longer entangled in what appears to be a struggle for a higher goal and to be concerned with enemies and the everyday kick of adrenaline involved in a life on the extremist right, as Eva explains:

*'Some days I am so happy just getting home from work or school and 'oh, the couch' and then just lie there, and other days I just whizz around the flat and THIS! cannot be the meaning of my life! It should not be like this! It's so damned boring and pointless!!' And it varies somewhat. If I had a day where I had been quite frustrated or angry, I would be very restless. Some days you come home and are just as happily tired due to what you've done today. I have been good, and other days, no. ... So some days I know for myself that I am so very restless and think the world is annoying, then I have to keep myself from going out in the evening to a bar or something. Then I stay at home instead, because then I have a tendency to relapse into the old behaviour which is not necessarily so pleasant – she says ironically. You also learn over time to identify it and to stay away. But everyone has days when*

*you think that life sucks and you just lean back and think 'no'. But I think for some, especially when you have a bit of aggression and there are such days ... it is required that you resist the desire to let go of the frustration and then get out and run in the woods or something, just to get rid of it. In my world or in my experience, if I'm not doing anything to get rid of it, then it just grows, it just gets worse and worse every day until you just explode.'*

Even though – on some days – Eva is searching for a higher meaning in her life, she has still invested so much in her present identity and life that she actively resists any temptation to relapse into her old behaviour. This is despite the fact that none of Eva's present investments in the new figured worlds in which she is involved seem as obvious to her as did her identification with the extreme right wing. This might be due to the emotional side of being a right-wing extremist, which had offered very intense feelings indeed for several of the informants, such as hatred, aggression and adrenaline highs through participation in demonstrations or just by 'warming up' before them, by listening to hardcore White Power music, as one of them once explained. The emotions set in motion by the music have been so strong that he still got a kick out of just listening to the same music years after having left the extremist right.

This said, the extremist right or equivalent still does not have any power over Eva or tempt her in any way to give up her present life. Eva has also developed an insight which makes her capable of identifying her feelings – aggression, restlessness, loss of meaning – and refrain from going out in the evenings when she feels restless, annoyed or the like, to avoid relapsing into her old behaviour of drinking and being aggressive. She knows that she has to take care of her aggression level and react on it, for it not to take control over her.

Eva's and Gunnar's examples illustrate how, through their struggle to invest themselves in diverse worlds and with the support of others, they have developed sensitivities and sensibilities towards themselves and others in other diverse figured worlds than the extremist right.

## Historical Nazi references hinder the individual's repositioning in present day society

Identity combines the intimate subjective world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations, catching subjects in the tensions between past histories that have settled in them and the present (Holland et al. 1998, p. 4-5). Yet, people are constrained in their identity formation, because a person's identity depends upon social support to come into existence.

Constraints are linked to two different but interconnected orders: the *time/space of local practices* linked to figured worlds and the time/space of *socio-historic productions*, which flow into one another in complex ways. Socio-historic productions are socio-historically produced, collectively recognised discourses, practices, policies and artefacts that constitute history in the present and which shape local practices.

These socio-historic productions transcend trans-local networks that agents, who move in and out of different figured worlds, make part of their personal knowledge, which they carry with them across worlds (Holland 2010: 273 – 276).

Identity interconnects the intimate with the public, yet people's ability to organise themselves in positions linked to an identity largely depends on other people's confirmation of their claim to particular identities. Therefore, the individuals cannot solely decide who they are, but depend on others' perception of them, both in order to confirm their identity, but especially to become positioned relative to socially identified others.

Positional identities are linked to power, status, privilege and a wider moral universe as people draw upon cultural resources of socio-historic time in their identification and positioning of newcomers (Holland et al. 1998). The constraints that individuals experience in this study are therefore immense, as Bjørge and Hogan (2009) point out. Individuals with a past in racist and neo-Nazi groups are generally very stigmatised by mainstream society and run a great risk of being rejected or haunted by their extremist past in social and professional contexts, a point which my research supports as it remains a continuous problem for these individuals to handle their past in relation to new social relations, both in their private and professional lives (Christensen 2014). The general view of neo-Nazis in present day society is inscribed in a socio-historic formation referring back to the totalitarian state of Nazi Germany and its crimes against humanity during World War II. The socio-historical link makes present-day members as well as former members of groups identified as neo-Nazis some of the most stigmatised individuals in mainstream societies in the Western world. The already very complicated process of altering their identity and position is reinforced by people's "Western" notion of identity that takes as its prototype an isolated, disembodied, coherent and originary subject. The socio-historical link and the Western notion of identity, together, add to the stigmatisation and associated assignment of low status to former right-wing extremists and positions them as deviants, as Eva says:

*'Many times leaving does not necessarily mean that you will be accepted in mainstream society. You have to prove yourselves, and I think it is not all that have the strength to do it, and*

*it's not all that, even if you are trying to prove yourself, becomes accepted. They always say that 'once an addict - always an addict' and 'once a Nazi - always a Nazi', and it is often seen that way, which is also one of the reasons why you do not always like to talk to people about what you have been. As they nearly always question whether you are still like that. So I have full sympathy for all the people who do not come from there (mainstream society), because I have been wildly frightened and I most of all, I have just been lucky, and had I not, I would not have had a normal life. It's still a struggle to live a Svensson life<sup>100</sup> ...'* (interview transcript 2013)

Western societies' perception of identity as the outcome of a character or/and inner core classifies the individual who undergoes a dramatic transformation as ambiguous, making it hard for others to categorise, which puts the individual in a conflictual position. As people's everyday understanding of identity does not include an extreme transformation of self-understanding as a possibility, making the claim of an altered identity difficult, which can, as Eva points out, make some people refrain from trying to leave a deviant group and change because they might doubt that they have the strength required to overcome the odds. The expression that Eva refers to, 'once a Nazi –always a Nazi' is a sort of caricature used especially by the extremist left, but nonetheless conveys how people tend to perceive others in everyday life. This approach is also reinforced by the mainstream perception of terrorists and political activists as people who have an ideological conviction that makes them seek out groups representing their points of view. Rather than the other way around; where people become involved in groups for other reasons, after which they develop an ideological conviction (Bjørge 2009, Christensen 2009, 2014). The last sentence emphasised peer significance for the individual identity formation, both on their way in, but definitely also on their way out of extremist groups – as the process is very similar, emphasising that a person's identity is an outcome of participation and interaction in figured worlds. The everyday perceptions of identity as stable and the stigmatisation of people who have been associated with neo-Nazism keep having different impacts on former participants' lives.

Several informants have experienced constraints, for example in relation to the opinions that they are entitled to express - when people know about their past - without running the risk of becoming categorised as dubious by others. The result is, as Gunnar points out below, the application of what he perceives as double standards. As people condemn others for being former Nazis

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<sup>100</sup> Svensson is a typical Swedish surname, but in this context it is used as slang to convey an image of a sort of average, middle class Swedish person working from 8 to 5 with 2 children, a wife, a villa and a Volvo.

according to – as he says – a universal standard, whereby they, in his view, fall into the trap of categorising others according to a single standard - like the Nazis did - as he points out below. This kind of categorisation follows lines of what is defined as 'cultural identities', which are formed in relation to major structural features of society such as ethnicity, gender, race, nationality and sexual orientation (Holland et al. 1998: 7), but which also seems to apply to deviant identities as criminals, terrorists or right-wing extremists. These sorts of categories are broad, making stereotyping and stamping an easy outcome. Gunnar explains: *'When I work with a client from Exit, I have to ask the right questions because it is very easy to judge people. Part of our job is also to promote a democratic view or what? But you also need to maintain that you are allowed to say what you think and believe – which you can't* (said with reference to his experience as a former neo-Nazi). *Because you may well be misunderstood, and then you are put into a category where your views are inconvenient and which makes the ones who leave the National Socialist (NS) world understand that that's the way it is. First they leave, and they may have problems with their old mates, and secondly, if they continue to be improper in their views, if I don't express myself in the right sense, then I get problems with society, and you always have a stamp, they will always have a stamp'*. Gunnar had, prior to the conversation, used the example of the Gaza Strip and said that he would think twice before claiming that he perceived Gaza as a huge open air prison, controlled by the Israelis. Because the reason for his negative view of Israel in this connection might be misunderstood by others and interpreted against a historical horizon of meaning and the positioning of him as first and foremost an (old) Nazi – irrespective of the present context and his present position. As he explains: *'If an ex-Nazi who has been a Nazi for 10 - 15 years expresses himself in certain ways, then I will always have it.. the link will always be made; 'oh, isn't that quite close to a neo-Nazi view?'. I do not have the same freedom any more, I have to be careful what I say, now you know, I am the type who does not give a fucking damn whether people will judge me, that's their right. Therefore... the idea is ... if you have defected, you've got a job, you have become a father and you do not think actively about it, that is, you're not active in your thoughts, because it is a slow process which is ongoing (the process of change), you do not have the time to be active, you have to change nappies, you need to work, work out what the hell do I know. You are not a potential danger to society any more.'*

Tina: *'But I guess that you have the right to think whatever you want to think, as long as you do not act upon it?'*

My comment is both linked to the idea of freedom of speech and to how employees from the Danish secret service have emphasised that their job is to react to people's actions. Yet, also bearing in mind the extremely complicated link between people's expressions and their actions - extreme statements do

not per se indicate a willingness to act (Bjørge and Horgan 2009).

Gunnar: *'Yes, exactly. But I see it like this, what are human beings? They indoctrinate people and say that there is a standard. It's almost the same thing as saying: it's good to have been a neo-Nazi or what? For me it's the FUCKING same thing, do you know why? Because if you have a standard for how people should be, then there is a system that has given this standard, and what is the difference between that system and neo-Nazi thinking? For me it's the same, I will be a free man and able to express myself and be free, and I think that's what most people want, and they are damned tired of damned standards designed to measure what they say, how to behave, who they talk to.'* (interview transcript 2013)

As Gunnar points out, he will not be able to 'leave' his past – at least for many years to come – because of his having been a Nazi specifically, which positions him in a category with a very particular association in socio-historical times in the Western world today. Gunnar's example emphasises that the individual's self-understanding is not necessarily reflected in other people's affordance of positions to newcomers. As mentioned before, Nazism is strongly condemned because of its historical link, which gives people strong negative sentiments towards former and present neo-Nazis. Yet, the process of making individuals become neo-Nazi in present day Scandinavia<sup>101</sup> rarely seems to entail a clear stance towards Nazism as an ideology and practice that created the frame of interpretation which made holocaust occur (Koonz 2005, Baumann 1994, Arendt 1968), which is often presumed. It rather seems to be the result of a complicated process of increasing ideological conviction as a result of participation in extremist groups because of identification with friends already involved in the extremist right, a poor understanding of political processes in society, fascination with Nazi artefacts and social interaction (Bjørge 1997, Arnstberg and Hållén 2000, Fangen 2001).

## The problem of *becoming* in a society perceiving identity as unambiguous

As several of my informants had been involved in the extremist right from between 4 to 10 years, their history in person would influence their references and positions in the present. A common problem among people who have left gangs and/or extremist groups and who might have spent year(s) in prison is that they do not have a similar life course to that of the majority of the popu-

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<sup>101</sup> Whereas this argument is most likely found in Scandinavia, it may not necessarily be similar in Germany, the Netherlands, etc. as the context seems to have an impact of processes in and out of extremist groups. (Bjørge and Horgan 2009)

lation. This also poses a challenge when they are in a situation where they have to introduce themselves, what to – if at all – tell about the years which they would rather not talk about? And how should they handle their deviant frame of reference in relation to others? As Jeff pointed out: *'We had some days here in Fryshuset – of which EXIT is part - where we were going to know about other projects – in Fryshuset – ... during these days I had to interact with two girls who come from 'United Sisters' and they were discussing quilted jackets... and I was approaching them, and I said, 'Hey, what are you talking about?', 'We are talking about quilted jackets', and I was kind of, 'Can I sit down?', 'Sure' - and I sat down and I kind of thought about what is the first thing that comes to mind with quilted jacket?' They were discussing colours, fits and where to get them and how much they cost and stuff like that, and the first thing that came to my mind was that it is really hard to punch through a quilted jacket with a baton, you have to have like a steel pipe or something to get through to be able to hurt someone. When it is winter, you have to have a much more solid object to punch through, you have to have one of these expandable batons, it is kind of useless, it doesn't do much damage. That was the first thing that came to my mind, and I said, 'well, you really have to have a solid baton to get through a quilted jacket.' They looked at me really strangely and said, 'Hey, you are from Exit, right?', 'Yeah, I am from Exit,' and they said, 'Is that your reference to a quilted jacket?' and I said, 'Yeah, that is my reference to a quilted jacket.'* (interview transcript 2013).

Sediments from your past history might be a problem to act upon in the present as they position the individual in certain ways, requiring of others an openness in order to afford the other a position in his/her claim to identity – which these girls do by first asking Jeff if he comes from EXIT. By doing this, they confirm his position as coach and part of Fryshuset, yet Jeff's references would be odd in most people's eyes, which at the same time positions him as a deviant before he became part of EXIT and Fryshuset – which in this case is accepted by the girls. Jeff also seems to be surprised by this reference being the first thing that comes into his mind in relation to the jacket. As his first perception of the jacket is through the horizon of meaning relevant for a right-wing extremist in a fight, an action which has not been part of his life for years, but nonetheless remains part of Jeff's history and frame of interpretation and is reactivated in certain situations.

Such everyday situations where an individual who has entered a different figured world experiences a lack of shared frames of reference in comparison to his new peers can create feelings of loneliness, shame, guilt and the fear of expulsion. The new associates will, therefore, use the cultural resource of the present figured world in their perception and associated positioning of others – making criminal and extremist experiences a negative deviation. As part of

being former participants in extremist groups, the individuals need to develop strategies to handle their past in respect of their interaction with others. There are no simple solutions as to how to act upon the individuals' past when they are questioned about this by others. This is in spite of the fact that the issue is of great concern to the informants as it might have a crucial impact on their future relations – as to some extent they depend on peoples' openness for the possibility of a personal transformation.

As Per, a former extremist left punk and subsequently a right-wing extremist, says about his situation, which is completely out of his hands, *'During that time – when he was a right-wing extremist - I had a complete uniform and was a skinhead and had boots and a bomber jacket so I was completely in it and since ... well, I still think that it is tiresome to have it as part of my luggage, and always when you meet new people, then the feeling is there that: NOW...NOW it will be revealed, in a way.'*

Tina: *'In what sense or how do you think?'*

Per: *'I do not know ... well, for example, now I'm out on a dating site and the thing is that, if you google my name, it's so unfortunate that there is something about me in a Socialist forum, and it says ... it is l..i..k..e ...t..h..a..t..— he says very hesitantly - that I was a Nazi and such, but it says that I was a Nazi leader and things like that. It's amazing, they just speculate about me. But nowadays it is very common for managers and others to google people. It's a bit annoying.'*

Tina: *'Did you ever try to contact them and ask if they can remove it?'*

Per: *'Yes, but the group no longer exists - it is just kind of there, but it is not an active thing - he laughs a little with no joy - I do not know how long it will exist, and there is no legal way of getting it removed. I have investigated the possibility of getting it off, and it does not seem to work.'*

Tina: *'And have you got anybody asking you why you are there? From these dating sites, for example?'*

Per: *'No, it hasn't gone that far, but I'm worried that they might figure it out because, normally, you do these days. So, it is easy to explain why or it is not simple, but there is an explanation that I can live with, why it was as it was. But if this is one of the first things that people find out about me, it's not good'* (interview transcript 2013).

The contextual story of Per's involvement with a neo-Nazi group, which does not appear on the internet, is his very difficult upbringing and him being a victim of mockery by a black girl and her brother in school<sup>102</sup>. Prior to his involvement with the extremist right, he was a dedicated member of the punk and extremist left-wing scene. By coincidence, he was attacked by the girl one

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<sup>102</sup> Being mocked and attacked by individuals of darker skin is one of the reasons identified for youths' involvement in racist-oriented – or right-wing extremist groups in marginalised neighbourhoods (Björge 1997)



day in the centre of Stockholm and was defended by a skinhead from a neo-Nazi group, who became his friend. The friendship got Per involved in the group for a little more than a year. But in the internet age, who would have the time or energy to investigate Per's story any further than a couple of clicks?

The way we organise societies at the moment creates a feeling of continuous acceleration (Rosa 2014) and adds increasing constraints to an already complicated process of leaving an extremist identity as the perception of identity as stable and coherent potentially hampers a person's involvement in different worlds. People act in – and move across – many figured worlds at greater and greater speed. This adds pressure to their success of leaving a (positive) impression of themselves in the eyes of others as prolonged interaction with the same people has become increasingly rare, a situation which tends to marginalise and exclude individuals with more than usually complex life stories and associated, ambiguous identities, making them harder to categorise. As they are rarely in a position to introduce themselves in great detail and often run the risk of judgment and positioning based on people's prejudices, as mentioned above, combined with an unreflective expectation of an unambiguous identity formation, which also emphasises how history in person can remain a continuous problem.

Another challenge for the individuals in this study in the course of transforming their self-understanding and identity is the loss of position linked to their status in the groups and their competences, which have made them able to support themselves and sometimes generate money for the cause. When they leave the group, they do not only lose status, but are also stripped of the figured worlds that made their competences prestigious and useful as their capacities are considered useless in the alternative figured worlds they enter after life as right-wing extremists, and often with a criminal record. Due to institutional decisions such as the documentation of people's criminal records and the cultural interpretation of individuals with a criminal and extremist record as deviants, employment also provides a challenge. A job in this context is, however, of significance as it can provide the arena potentially supporting the individuals further – step-by-step investment in new worlds after EXIT. But as Gunnar says, getting a job is difficult:

Gunnar: *'A catch 22 is to be quite newly released from prison, and you have a fairly significant status among friends, and you have work experience, and you think that it will be OK. Yet, you get a cold shoulder everywhere, it is a catch 22. I'm a vehicle body technician, and there are a lots of jobs, but I have no job, so there are forces that affect it all, or at least in that city, so. We are quite a few here – employees at Fryshuset, EXIT and Passus*

– *who have that same experience. But talking about myself, I left both the Nazi world and a gang world due to my own principles and on my own, and of course it was very hard, there was no retaliation. But it was hard to adapt to society because society was not ready for me. They usually say that the ones who have been members are not ready for society. But in this case, society was not ready for me; the community was not ready to believe in me, if you understand what I mean? And I was in the NS movement for 8 years, so it's a lot of years.'* (interview transcript 2013)

The reintegration of people with a criminal record is continuously discussed in societies. The issue touches upon guilt, punishment, revenge, and if there are victims involved, their perception of fairness. But at a societal level, the question seems to be whether the punishment of a criminal also entails rehabilitation – making a reintegration back into society easier – which in turn raises questions about people's responsibilities as to making such a process possible by accepting employment of former criminals – who have served time and taken their punishment – as well as making a repositioning of these individuals possible. As Gunnar points out, where should one turn, both professionally and privately, if society is unable to offer a real alternative to individuals with a criminal record? The individual is then left with a choice of surviving on social benefits, but is that likely to happen? The combination of a massive loss of social prestige by leaving a gang or extremist group and the giving up of a criminal competence as a means of self-support might be too demanding a situation for most people if reintegration into society is too complicated – adding to the already challenging process of a change of lifestyle and transformation of self-understanding and identity in a society that perceives identity as being the result of an inner core.

## Conclusion

A radical transformation of self-understanding and identity is possible. Yet, a successful repositioning of an individual with an extremist experience requires personal strength and motivation to transform. But it is as crucial that relational others are able to afford the person a position as personal transformation grows out of participation in figured worlds. This also entails the importance of people's tolerance towards others and the importance of communicating to mainstream society that identity is context-dependent rather than the result of an inner core. History in person is the sediment from past experiences, upon which one improvises using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject positions afforded one in the present, as Dorothy Holland et al. (1998: 18) write. But as has become evident, some sediment

cannot be improvised upon, but rather, the individual needs to become aware of it in order to control it and avoid action upon it.

As has become indisputable, it is a complicated process to leave an extremist right-wing group and develop a different self-understanding and identity, as the process involves individuals' motivation to leave an extremist group behind. However, a successful change of lifestyle and self-understanding also requires the possibility of being able to participate in different figured worlds in order to alter the individual's self-perception and identity. A successful transformation therefore also requires a tolerant society working for a possible rehabilitation and repositioning of individuals with extremist and criminal backgrounds, highlighting the question of imprisonment as punishment or as a means for rehabilitation. Perceived from the position of the motivated individual and society as such, rehabilitation is of benefit to both. Yet, the third perspective represented by victims of right-wing extremist violence makes it an extremely complicated question, which is not being answered here.

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# Conclusion

Given the abductive character of this study, I wish to gather and put the different insights from the articles into perspective to provide a summary of the answers to the questions being investigated in the thesis.

The research is presented in the form of six articles, yet I have come to perceive it as an article-based monograph as each article adds new layers to the presentation of the area and touches upon subjects being discussed in the following article. This way I have organised the thesis places the conclusion at the end.

I set out to provide answers to the questions: in which ways do participation and social interaction in social settings make people transform their base of reflection? I also wanted to identify which cultural and social sources individuals draw upon in the process, to point out what conditions actually support them to alter their identity. These questions have helped me give answers to which sorts of approaches that (can) support a person's disengagement from extremist groups, which I summarise below. The processes that are analysed in the articles also provide general insight into individuals' identity formation. Based on a qualitative approach and by analysing the data through the lens of a cultural-historically inspired social practice theory, I have generated detailed analyses and perspectives on the process that former right-wing extremist are going through in an exit programme. This has made me able to argue that participation and social interaction play equally important roles in a disengagement and deradicalisation process, as they do in the initial development of – or reinforcement of – an identity as a right-wing extremist; points of importance I shall expand on below.

The preface gives examples of state and NGO run exit programmes and the increased numbers of preventive measures instigated by numerous governments across Europe and elsewhere, making EXIT Sweden a programme out of many. Exit programmes are as much part - or outcomes - of the political agenda as the problem they are brought into the world to solve.

Despite, as exemplified in the articles, the success of an exit programme in supporting *individuals* in leaving extremist groups, there are potential negative outcomes inherent in the growing numbers of, especially, government-funded exit programmes.

The argument in favour of both preventive measures and exit programmes is to secure the general public through efforts, which aim at the prevention of radicalisation and reduce extremism and terrorism by offering support to people in leaving extremist groups. In spite of the positive arguments put forward in relation to preventive measures and exit programmes, the risk is that while governments display action to a broader audience - both nationally as well as internationally - at the same time, they maintain the status quo. The reason for this is that exit programmes and preventive measures individualise the political agenda inherent in the activities of extremists and terrorists, because the applied means only address the individual, or potentially a collective - a terror group or militia - who for some reason or other *has been involved* in actions perceived as a threat to the establish order. This is the reason why such measures have so far been implemented without getting anywhere near addressing the issues supposedly causing people to join extremist groups in increasing numbers.

The preface exemplifies and argues that radicalisation, extremism and terrorism happen as a response to a broader context of macro social and political moves, both nationally and internationally. Therefore, we need to approach the informants', as I argued in the preface, participation in the extremist right in a cultural-historically situated context, as they were influenced by several different, and at times simultaneous, currencies; (neo-)Nazism as a historical-political force in Swedish society before and especially after the Second World War, mainstream music with an extremist right-wing agenda as well as discourse about the number of refugees and immigrants coming to Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s. This is also the case, as I argued, with the character of Anders Behring Breivik's actions and the reasons for them, which needs to be approached both at a political level - as well as in research of such and related subjects - as situated in a broader context and thus informed by a political agenda and rhetoric promoted by various players at a national as well as international level (Berntzen and Sandberg 2014).

Therefore, to approach radicalisation and extremism through an agenda with a narrow focus on preventive measures targeting areas or part of a population perceived as vulnerable to radicalisation and extremism and exit programmes - and thus individuals - might prove to backfire. As going down such a path will entail the risk of stripping terror attracts or extremist activities of their political context, reducing it to outcome of (some vulnerable) individuals' social-psychological issues only. Whereby the societal issues being at the core of social movements, extremist and terror groups remain unacknowledged and thus ignored at a political level.

The work of north European exit programmes to some extent also seeks to address the problems that are seemingly creating - in this case - extremist right-wingers, yet they cannot solve these problems - alone. Fryshuset is a political player by their promotion of tolerance and inclusion in the media and through their effort to influence social workers and government officials and anybody else who visits the centre. EXIT also informs a wider audience about their vision of the cause that is increasing extremism in society. Fryshuset and EXIT are thus part of the political agenda by actively trying to promote their discourse of youngsters getting involved in extremist groups because of marginalisation. Their effort is a way of promoting their approach and understanding of the problem in order to make their perception and version of the reason for youths' involvement in extremism accepted among a wider part of the population.

Acknowledging that there is no such thing as a profile of the individual getting engaged in the extremist right wing, or any other extremist group for that matter, we need to perceive and maintain that extremist identities are the outcomes of both political forces at work at a macro level as well as individuals' engagement in a movement, the ideology of which and - importantly - practice of which requires participation in a social process in cultural-historical times - potentially causing individual problems afterwards. Therefore, it is important to recognize the role of (inter)national, social and political issues, political movements, politicians' and opinion-formers' rhetoric in the development of extremism and terrorism (Neumann 2013, Köhler 2014, Berntzen and Sandberg 2014), while at the same time acknowledging the significance of programmes like EXIT to help support the individual in altering their extremist identity and outlook afterwards.

Fryshuset and EXIT argue that participation in destructive groups – such as the extremist right wing or gangs - is an outcome of marginalisation, and this is why the answer is empowerment and self-esteem. EXIT's approach to extremism as an outcome of socio-psychological issues makes them run the risk of supporting the individual, while to a certain extent ignoring the political issues involved.

This also implies that, while there are different reasons for individual engagement in the extremist right wing, the clients' perceptions of their initial involvement revolved round individual experiences of marginalisation and difficulties during childhood and/or youth. Without it being my intention to call their explanation into question, I want to point to the possibility that the clients' perception is an outcome of their identification with the figured world of their coach and thus EXIT and Fryshuset, which makes their approach yield



narrow explanations to a certain degree for the individuals involved. This said despite the enormously positive outcome the individuals in the programmes achieved. That is, as the articles shows, the possibility for former right-wing extremists based on a personal motivation supported by their identification with their coaches situated in an alternative symbolic world and their joint activities, to change their lives and develop an alternative identity.

Yet, I will maintain the importance of keeping and expanding the focus on the political aspect involved, yet also acknowledge that socio-psychological processes are *also* part of the issues - among others. EXIT Sweden is a programme that supports processes, in an individualised manner, which has already been instigated by the individual contacting EXIT. Exit programmes and thus EXIT Sweden handle the socio-psychological difficulties that individuals experience when they leave an extremist group as well as their ideological conviction. Yet, exit programmes as such seem not to yield answers to the challenges of increased radicalisation and extremism, which beyond reasonable doubt seem also to be the outcomes of other reasons than individuals' socio-psychological problems. I thus argue for a broader focus on reasons for radicalisation at a macro level, and, at the same time, there remain ways of supporting individuals' disengagement and deradicalisation at an individual or micro level, yet to a greater extent informed by the perception that these people are not any more vulnerable or marginalised than any significant others.

## Putting this study into perspective to identify its contribution to the field

I set out by presenting the issues related to the research questions and empirical setting by bringing forward issues of relevance for the field, including a profiling of exit programmes in a broader context and geographical area. Yet contrariwise, my approach and ambition have rather been - and remained - to focus sharply on the many details involved in the process of developing a particular programme - EXIT Sweden - as well as the process that former and present clients go through in their disengagement and deradicalisation process in order to establish an alternative identity. Yet, what is already known about exit programmes? And in which ways does this study offer new insights into the field of disengagement and deradicalisation? As well as add attention to the process of becoming, as analysed through a cultural-historically inspired social practice theory?

Of central importance in this thesis are programmes and ways of supporting individuals in disengaging and deradicalising, into which, over the last decade,

an increasing number of scholars have set out to research by focusing on aspects of radicalisation, disengagement, deradicalisation and exit programmes as well as similar subjects. In the preface, I have introduced several studies that explore various aspects of these matters from different angles. Several studies thus focus on counter policies or strategic approaches in counterterrorism targeting the ideological justifications for violent extremism through research at a macro level (Al-Hadlaq, Boucek 2011, 2009, Rubin 2011, Dechesne 2011). Others conduct sociological studies giving a profile of the programmes and the need for them as well as discussing the different approaches used in a rehabilitation effort of (former) terrorists or extremists or/and best practices identified so far (Ashour 2009, Barrett and Bokhari 2009, Abuza 2009, Gunaratna and Hassan 2011, Neumann 2010, El-Said 2012, Ramalingam and Tuck 2014<sup>103</sup>, Riazat and Tuck 2014). Yet, others again focus - in an overall manner - on differences and similarities among groups, ways of leaving and possible state interventions (Bovenkerk 2011). A few studies do finally zoom in on a micro level by bringing insight into paths and reasons for individuals to disengage and deradicalise, and the efforts which support people in leaving extremist groups, both psychical and cognitive efforts, as well as why certain approaches seem to be more successful than others (Björge 1997, 2009, 2011, Horgan 2009, Porta 2009, Davies and Spalek 2012, Dalsgaard-Nielsen 2013, Köhler 2014, Barrelle 2010, 2014 A, 2014, Altier et al. 2014).

Most of the research mentioned approaches the field from a macro sociological perspective by focusing on the significance of counterterrorism strategies and the outlines of the programmes as well as on ways and reasons for disengagement and deradicalisation. They thus mostly remain too remote from any particular individuals, social behaviour and interaction, organisations and changes to account for what is 'going on in the programmes and for the people involved'.

On the contrary, the centre of the present study is anthropological, both in method and analytical approach, focusing narrowly on one programme and the individuals involved. Therefore, the outcome of the study is to a larger extent very different from what is mentioned above. Nonetheless, it adds to the existing research by adding a close look into how exit programmes work, perceived from different individuals' perspectives. I have thus identified these

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<sup>103</sup>Insight from the article 'Adding a Grey Tone to a Black and White World View – How Role Models and Social Encouragement can lead Former Right-Wing Extremists to Transform their Identity' published as part of Rieker, Peter (Hrsg.) anthology; *Hilfe zum Ausstieg? Ansätze und Erfahrungen professioneller Angebote zum Ausstieg aus rechtsextremen Szenen*, Weinheim/Basel: Beltz Juventa, has been integrated into the report as the use of coaches/mentors are giving best practice as an example.

day-to-day practices of social interaction, what the individuals involved do, and especially why the different activities and dialogues that the clients are engage in have an impact on their lives by making them identify new coherences generating new insights, understandings and identities.

Due to the theoretical approach of practice theory, I have been able to view the programme as perceived from a person-centric dimension informed by a broader frame of structural conditions in cultural-historical times. This approach has made me draw the overall conclusion that the Swedish exit programme supports the individual by supporting him/her in developing an alternative identity by making the client engaged in alternative activities. This is what makes them develop new sorts of embodied knowledge, which I have come to believe is the main reason why EXIT Sweden's clients seem to leave the extremist world and deradicalise.

This research has also provided thorough knowledge, compared to the above mentioned studies, about the significance of trust, motivation, activities and interaction between individuals involved in the programmes - the relation between interlocutors/mentors/coaches and mentees/clients and the impact of that relation on, mainly, the clients. This study thus contributes with new knowledge and brings the understanding achieved through, especially Bjørgo's push and pull factors, (Bjørgo 2009) and Barrelles pro-integration model, a step further. This is done by giving answers to why, as pointed out by Barrelle; coping, skills and self-care are necessary for an individual to move from surviving to thriving in society (2014:12). By identifying the particular conditions inherent in social relations in exit programmes, I have provide insight into, why and in what particular ways social relations, interactions and participation have an impact on the individual's process of disengagement and deradicalisation.

The research has moved up close to the individuals actually engaged there and then in the process of not only disengaging and deradicalising, but actually being on the path of developing alternative identities.

Schmid (2013:220) and Neumann argue (2010), among others, that there are limited data and knowledge to illuminate the processes at an individual and group level of disengagement. The present research provides such data as it displays enough details to give an insight into the significance of the individuals' (inter)actions in the programmes and their uniqueness and psychological complexity as an outcome of diverse developmental processes. The approach has yielded an understanding of the significance of the different relations involved as well as of how and why a disengagement and/or deradicalisation programme is perceived as supportive by the individuals at whom the pro-

grammes are aimed. This is done by identifying in detail the significance of activities and dialogue as perceived by the people going through these programmes, and thus the impact on their feelings, perceptions and experience. The study has likewise provided insight into how the particular programme has been developed and the outcome of that development for the employees in it, which also provides information about on what base the programmes are informed about the general needs of the individuals in them.

In May 2011, the International Peace Institute (IPI) in New York published a report based on de-radicalisation initiatives in eight Muslim-majority countries. The IPI report tried to draw some 'preliminary lessons' and highlight 'good practices', yet the report offered little detail in addition to general observations like:

- Family matters;
- Addressing the social network is key;
- Programmes should address individual motivations;
- Credibility of the interlocutors is vital;
- Prisoner treatment plays a crucial role;
- Post-programme monitoring or care;
- The importance of civil society involvement;
- Reactive measures should be situated within more proactive approaches;
- The value of education.

In the end, the 2011 IPI report had to concede that 'research on de-radicalisation and rehabilitation programmes is still in its infancy' (Schmid 2013:42, Neumann 2010, Köehler 2014). The present study moves a step further, since I show in which ways participation and social interaction in social settings make motivated people transform their base of reflection, by analysing the cultural and social sources that individuals draw upon in the process, which also makes me able to point out what makes them alter their identity. This approach give concrete answers to which approaches can support a person's disengagement from extremist groups and helps the person deradicalise and thus illuminates why it is that the above-mentioned points in the International Peace Institute are important.

The issue of this research has not been to simply insist on the dynamic dimension of the self, but to account for the interplay between change and a kind of stabilised identity. Even though I have argued that identity is in a constant process of change, I have also defined a stabilised identity as the means by which individuals come to identify themselves and are identified by others, as

particular kinds of actors or persons. The approach, as argued in the articles, provides general insight into individuals' identity-formation processes by showing how the individual becomes a different version of him/herself by managing to become established in a new figured world by the exercise of control over the aspect of his/her behaviour unfit for the new world as well as by displaying new embodied senses and sensibilities. These moves together - new embodied knowledge as well as the reflective approach to oneself and a different figured world - are what seem to make the person become somebody else than a right-wing extremist supported by an exit programme. I shall finally summarise the particular findings of this study.

## Summary and conclusive remarks

At a general level, the analysis of the empirical data indicates that the coaches' participation in Fryshuset's and EXIT's daily practice and their support of the clients have an impact on the clients' identity-formation process. Coaches' participation in EXIT's practice comes to condition their perception of the reasons for their initial engagement in the extremist right as well as their perspectives of the support required to develop different sorts of identities, which they convey to the clients through their interaction with them. Likewise, clients and their different issues have an impact on the coaches' ongoing identity work and EXIT's practice development.

Yet, it is crucial that the coaches' deviant experience as former right-wing extremists is connected to a deliberate practice for it to become useful knowledge in organisations like EXIT and in the work with clients. One way of generating this kind of practice is to combine people with the particular embodied knowledge of the coaches and the social workers' reflective tools conditioning their experiences, which are both an integrated part of EXIT. The outcome of interaction as represented in the particular way that coaches come to use their former experiences when interacting with their clients and the impact of it show how interaction in socio-historical settings conditions people's perception of who they are and how they are supposed to act.

It appears to be common among clients to have poor self-knowledge as well as a poor understanding of society, political and cultural issues in general. Therefore, it is crucial to support clients for them to gain a better insight into themselves as well as into other people's situations by, for instance, working at Fryshuset and/or interacting with their coaches. This is one of the reasons

why it is important to help the clients become engaged in other kinds of activities and ways of interacting, because it helps them improve their understanding of themselves and makes them develop alternative embodied sorts of behaviour and knowledge. They also develop a different vision of other groups and individuals in a societal context - which in all seems to make them question their ideological orientation and reduces their aggression and potential use of violence and thus reduces the risk of relapsing into old behaviour patterns.

EXIT's staff have an extraordinary insight into the complicated process of disengagement and the personal change that former right-wing extremists are going through, and some of the staff have an extremely detailed and embodied knowledge of the target group and their outlook.

Thus, they know the issues with which the clients are dealing, and they acknowledge that the transformation process involved is not divided into neat steps forward, but consists of a development that takes place over a prolonged time span, also involving individuals relapsing into old behavioural patterns during the process.

These important aspects, combined with EXIT's understanding of identity as embedded and non-static, open up for an interaction with the clients that is built entirely on the notion that identity is an outcome of participation in particular social realms and is thus in a state of flux. This aspect seems to be quite unique for EXIT, but compared with other exit programmes mainly targeting the ideological orientation of the client, there seems to be good reason to promote EXIT's approach. EXIT's approach helps people gain insight into themselves and addresses both the ideological aspect and the practice that the individuals develop as part of the community of practice of the extremist group.

A successful approach thus seems to imply that the client becomes engaged in different activities, which I have described to outline that the socially mediated, culturally defined situated learning process is the centre of a transformation of identity.

Because people in this study have made radical changes, their process analysed in a social practice theory has made me able to point out the conditions which have helped former extremists change their identity and self-understanding.

I have thus been able to identify the different perspectives and artefacts which the client initially picked up and used to be able to act in alternative manners

and which, over a prolonged time span, become disposition in new figured worlds, allowing them to establish new identities.

Individuals who wish to disengage and develop an alternative identity seem first and foremost to need a personal desire and strong motivation to leave the extremist right wing.

One of the aspects which are important to handle when supporting individuals who have been part of an extremist group is to make them aware of the meaning systems they have developed as an outcome of their participation. It is important to stress that this does not, as mentioned in the articles, imply that the individuals should be engaged in ideologically oriented discussions, but ought to happen through dialogues concerning everyday matters in ways that instigate reflection potentially expanding the clients' everyday understanding of political matters.

Through dialogue, coaches help clients become reflective about themselves and their world view as coaches question their views and contextualise societal issues by bringing forth diverse aspects, making them appear different to the clients. In spite of the meaning system which constituted their horizon of interpretation adding significance to their reactions, their behaviour and thought patterns, it is, as discussed in the preface, equally important to address and handle the embodied practice and the competence they have developed.

The coach's dialogue with the clients adds grey tones to a white and black world view by building a bridge between a world perceived through the ideological frame and the world of culturally shared knowledge in society at large, which is of crucial importance to the client's further development of a different perspective on the world and him/herself.

These approaches emphasise that dialogue affects people by creating reflection and different perspectives for those involved, yet the engagement in non-verbalised activities likewise creates new experiences and instigates reflections.

The fact that the coaches have previous experience in the extreme right makes it easier for the clients to identify with them as the clients perceive their shared experience as being of paramount importance to their relationship. They emphasised how their coaches understood them, which enables them to discuss the emotional side of participation in the extremist right.

To be able to discuss the emotional side of participation is initially of great importance, both as a way of processing their stories, but also to get new perspectives on the 'truths' they have so far been allowed to take for granted as

they have previously been surrounded by similarly disposed friends on the extremist right.

For the coach, the common past is just one aspect of EXIT's multifaceted practice of bolstering clients' desire to disengage and strengthen their self-understanding and social skills. The coach's conscious use of his past and his positioning of himself as someone with intimate knowledge of the meaning of participation also seem to help the clients open up for issues they would judge impossible to share with someone they would categorise as an outsider. The dialogue adds to the clients' perspective on a situation, which makes them question the perspective they have so far taken for granted. It is important to mention that, while a shared past initially is important, a coach without a past in - in this case - the extremist right can be a positive change for the clients at a later stage.

The shame of having been involved in neo-Nazism or associated groups also renders an open and non-judgmental approach to the potential and present clients crucial for a relation to emerge. The process of deradicalisation and disengagement therefore firstly involves building trust between the clients and the coaches for the clients to become open to the coaches and receptive towards the social learning, situated in their joint activities in different social settings.

The clients' difficulties vary, but since the coaches spend time on building a trustful relationship with them, they also have the possibility of identifying the individual clients' thoughts and behavioural patterns in great detail as well as their frames of reference for activities, hobbies, wishes for the future and the specific issues with which they are struggling.

Clients' trust in the coach is crucial as they are supported by the coach in upholding their decision to leave the extremist right and in their first tentative moves towards entering a different figured world. Trust also creates zones of proximal development between clients and coaches as the clients become attentive towards the coaches' actions and statements, which become artefacts they can improve on, making them develop further. By engaging the clients in activities, they make the clients rehearse the particular repertoire of activities linked to different figured worlds in order to develop sensitivities associated with these worlds.



A positive relation between clients and coaches also positions the coach as a role model as his life story becomes a symbolic artefact that the client can use in his or her thinking process in order to set his/her own course towards a different life. The coach also offers hope of a possibility of a different life by his story, having transformed himself from a former right-wing extremist into a family man and successful coach - whom people appreciate, respect and learn from.

Clients need to learn to master social situations, which requires social competencies and depends on going through a situated learning process. EXIT's staff teach clients how to interact and do things with the coaches, linking learning of social skills to everyday activities.

The point here is that the everyday life is composed of many different situations requiring different skills. When the individuals learn new skills, they gain social experiences and learn to identify new artefacts, which helps the individuals develop new perspectives on themselves and others as well as start the process of establishing different behavioural patterns and embodied knowledge.

The activities also let the coach engage in everyday practice with the clients, while he also talks about how to cope with various difficulties that could arise in the situation without using the tools of threats or harassment when dealing with others.

The above-mentioned points illuminate how important aspects of changing one's identity are an outcome of identifying oneself with another or other human being(s), thus becoming open and receptive towards the other(s). EXIT puts a lot of effort into building a trustful relation between coach and client, which is perceived as the basis for the further potential progress that is to take place. The dialogue and activities in which the coach and client engage together are key to the clients' transformation of their identities as these approaches give the clients social training and expand their repertoire of tools to interpret the surrounding society and themselves in ways which enhance their understanding of their overall situation.

The coaches and staff at EXIT work on the basis of a situated learning concept and link the learning to internal processes of reflection and objectification. Former extremists acquire new perspectives and social tools by participating in different situations with the coaches and by talking about their experiences with them, giving the coach the opportunity subtly to indicate points

of reference or symbolic devices which the clients can use in a similar future situation.

The concept is not only 'learning by doing', but also entails framing the clients' awareness of what they have learned as the coaches point out certain aspects of that learning and thereby make them available for the clients to reflect upon.

In this way, the coaches involve the clients in a process that provides them with new experiences to help mediate their transformation; they receive new tools they can use to deal with various situations and devices with which to think, making it possible for them to objectify their own behaviour. In the process, clients can gain self-esteem and develop alternative perceptions which alter their entire basis for reflection and reshape their world view, thereby allowing an alternative sense of self-understanding and identity to emerge.

Overall, these aspects indicate how individuals can come to identify with new figured worlds by others pointing out the material and non-material artefacts that evoke them. They thereby (potentially) learn to identify new perspectives and ways of acting, and they develop a sense towards these worlds by being introduced not only to the worlds, but, more importantly, to how they are supposed to act - and think - in them through the joint activities with another human being who is showing them the way.

To disengage from the extremist right wing and any other extremist groups seems to be possible by involving motivated individuals in learning methods embedded in everyday practice and through a non-judgmental dialogue in order to give the clients new social tools as well as experiences leading to higher self-esteem.

It seems likely that, by supporting individuals in developing social skills and letting them realise that they can still reintegrate into society, the motivation for change is reinforced.

Furthermore, in order to support a subject in a transformative process from an extremist environment, it appears important not only to convey an idea of the value of reflection, but also of the actual tools of how to reflect to enable the subject to interpret him/herself and his/her surroundings as well as the social skills involved in developing sensitivities for the clients to be able to enter alternative figured worlds.

The process of transforming an identity is thus an outcome of interaction, making the individual aware of a different horizon of interpretation as well as the pointing out of different material and non-material artefacts and how to

use them in different figured worlds in order for the individual to transform their identity.

Individuals thus seem to shape their identity in an ongoing process as outcomes of interaction and participation in socio-historical settings as the above-mentioned aspects illuminate both people's identity-formation process and the particular approaches that can support individuals motivated to disengage from - in this case, the extremist right and develop an alternative identity.

The commonalities, if not universal processes involved in leaving intense closed groups, also indicate that the model of support has the potential to aid other kinds of motivated individuals to leave diverse kinds of destructive sub-cultures. The situated learning process, which is part of EXIT's practice and embedded in the relation between coach and clients, is thus a certain way of introducing individuals to different material and immaterial artefacts and social experiences.

The strength of EXIT's practice is the very important acknowledgement that new skills are required for individuals to enter new worlds as well as the conveying of these tools to individuals through a situated learning process. These steps are absolutely crucial in order to create new possibilities and support motivated people in their development of self-understanding and alternative identities, which seems to help prevent them from further engagement in criminal and violent careers and makes them able to enter alternative worlds.

In spite of the commonalities involved in leaving (extremist) groups, they are always specific to their local culture and political setting, which requires the symbolic realm informing the specific type of clients or mentees to be very well understood indeed by the mentors or organisations that become involved.

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# Dansk resumé

## Titel: Et spørgsmål om deltagelse - løsrivelse fra det ekstremistiske højre, et casestudie fra Sverige

Menneskers årsager til at blive aktive deltagere i ekstreme grupper har igen-igen årene været i forskningens fokus. Til trods for den store opmærksomhed på individers involvering i ekstreme grupper, vælger de fleste at forlade dem for derefter at etablere en anden identitet og livsførelse, hvilket er fokus for denne afhandling.

Afhandlingen beskriver den komplekse proces, som følger *efter* en løsrivelse fra ekstreme grupper, hvor individet befinder sig mellem to verdener og er i færd med at udvikle en alternativ identitet - en identitet, som - i dette tilfælde - højreekstremist.

Afhandlingens tilnærmelse til radikalisering, ekstremisme og terrorisme er, at disse opstår i en kontekst og i samspil med nationale og internationale samfundsmæssige strømninger.

Deltagelse i højreekstremistiske grupper forandrer deltageren, da dennes selvforståelse, identitet og generelle forståelses- og fortolkningsramme betinges af gruppen og dennes virkeligheds opfattelse og ideologi. Denne udvikling bevirker, at flere individer har behov for støtte efter deres løsrivelse til at udvikle andre sociale kompetencer og identiteter end dem, de har etableret, som en del af en gruppe.

Studiet er baseret på et etnografisk feltarbejde ved EXIT, en svensk organisation der støtter personer, der søger at forlade den ekstremistiske højrefløj.

EXIT bruger tidligere højreekstremister som mentorer, der i et samspil mellem terapeutiske samtaler og aktiviteter støtter en mentee - en højreekstremist i færd med at forlade bevægelsen - i at udvikle alternative samfundsopfattelser og identitet.

Flere studier inden for terrorismeforskning stiller skarpt på de betingelser, der får individer til at løsrive sig fra ekstreme grupper, og skaber dermed indsigt i diverse exit-programmer og behovet for dem. Desuden diskuteres forskningen i de metoder, der er anvendt i rehabilitering af tidligere terrorister og ekstremister.



Dette studie går et skridt videre, idet afhandlingen skaber en antropologisk forankret indsigt i individernes specifikke løsrivelse og afradikaliseringsproces. Dette gøres ved at undersøge de specifikke måder, hvorpå deltagelse og social interaktion indlejret i det svenske exit-program medvirker til, at individerne i dette forandrer deres identitet samt hvorledes deres processer også afspejles i den anvendte praksis. Dermed giver studiet en detaljeret analyse af den krævende psykologiske proces, som forhenværende højreekstremister gennemgår med hjælp fra exit-programmet, efter de har forladt den ekstreme gruppe, samt hvilke metoder der synes at virke og især hvorfor for derigennem at give svar på de forhold, som støtter en persons løsrivelse fra ekstreme grupper, såvel som hvordan individer udvikler en alternativ identitet til den højreekstremistiske.

I artiklerne diskuteres, hvordan deltagelse i social praksis bevirker, at mennesker udvikler alternative perspektiver og identiteter via introduktion til artefakter. Denne sociale udpegning gør, i dette tilfælde, især klienterne opmærksomme på anderledes handlemåder, og de får derved nye sociale kompetencer, som medfører, at de kan handle på nye måder. I artiklerne argumenteres for, at interaktion i socio-historiske sammenhænge betinger folks opfattelse af, hvem de er, og hvordan de skal handle, hvilket over tid bliver til tilbojelighe-der, som gør, at de udvikler nye identiteter.

Undersøgelsen bygger på den kulturhistoriske skole i psykologi, der opfatter identitet og agency som specifikt knyttet til praksis i historisk og socialt betingede samt kulturelt konstruerede "verdner". Den begrebsætter det utal af sociokulturelt genkendelige forståelsesdomæner, som mennesker former og bliver formet i, for at undersøge, hvordan kulturelle systemer motiverer og retningsangiver handlen. Denne tilnærmelse er også kombineret med en social praksistilgang, der tydeliggør, hvordan personer er konstitueret gennem handling og deltagelse i specifikke fællesskaber.

Afhandlingen består af en introduktion og en samling på seks artikler og afsluttes med en opsummerende konklusion:

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2014) 'To Study the Significance of Social Interaction for Former Right-wing Extremists Wanting to Disengage: Doing Participant Observation and Qualitative Interviews', *Sage Research Methods Cases*, <http://srmo.sagepub.com/view/methods-case-studies-2014/n140.xml>

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2015) 'The Challenge of Researching neo-Nazis Struggling to Leave the White Power Movement' i Deuchar, Ross og Bhopal,

Kalwant, (red.) *'The complexities and dilemmas of researching marginalised groups'*  
Routledge

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2015) 'Tidligere ekstremisters erfaring som nyttig viden - at løsrive sig fra en ekstremistisk gruppe er en kompliceret affære i *Social Kritik*, *Tidsskrift for social analyse & debat* nr. 142 - juni 2015 og en engelsk version; 'How Extremist Experiences become Valuable Knowledge in EXIT Programmes i *Journal for Deradicalisation Summer/15*, nr. 3  
<http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/18>

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2015) When Good Intentions are not Enough - A Successful Mentor-Mentee Relation requires a Deliberate Practice' in *Psyke & Logos* (1)

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2014) 'Adding a Grey Tone to a Black and White World View – How Role Models and Social Encouragement can lead Former Right-Wing Extremists to Transform Their Identity' i Rieker, Peter (Hrsg.) *Hilfe Zum Ausstieg? Ansätze und Erfahrungen Professioneller Angebote zum Ausstieg aus rechtsextremen szenen*, Weinheim / Basel: Beltz Juventa.

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2015) 'The Continuous Struggle of Becoming...Somebody - Former Right-Wing Extremists' continued Process of Self-transformation and Social Repositioning after an Exit Programme'(ikke udgivet)

# English abstract

## Title: A question of participation – disengagement from the extremist right, a case study from Sweden

How individuals come to join extremist groups has been of great concern to scholars of terrorism over the years. Yet, most individuals do end their engagement and leave extreme or terrorist groups. The complex process that follows their disengagement into the development of an alternative identity is the subject of this thesis.

The thesis argues that radicalisation, extremism and terrorism take places as responses to a broader societal context of macro social and political moves, both nationally and internationally.

An individual changes when he or she becomes engaged in the extremist right wing, because he or she creates an identity relevant to the world of the particular group he or she is involved in. This causes some to need support after they disengage in order to deradicalise and develop new social skills and identities.

The research is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out at EXIT, a Swedish organisation providing support to individuals seeking to leave the extremist right. EXIT uses former right-wing extremists as mentors, who, based on therapeutic dialogue and activities, support their mentees - right-wing extremists wanting to leave the extremist right - in developing alternative world views, ways of self-understanding and identities.

Several studies focus on the conditions under which individuals involved in terrorism disengage, providing insight into diverse exit programmes and the need for them, as well as discuss the different approaches used in a rehabilitation effort of (former) terrorists or extremists. This study moves a step further as the thesis adds insight into individuals' disengagement and deradicalisation processes, by investigating the ways in which participation and social interaction embedded in the Swedish exit programme as a social setting cause individuals to alter their identity. It thus provides a detailed analysis of the demanding psychological process, which former right-wing extremists go through, supported by the exit programme after they have left an extremist group. The ambition is to give answers to what it is that supports a person's

disengagement from extremist groups and why, as well as how individuals develop an alternative identity to that of a right-wing extremist.

The thesis consists of six articles, which discuss how participation in social practice has introduced people to alternative perspectives and artefacts, which - in this case - clients/mentees initially picked up and used, to be able to act in alternative manners, which, over a prolonged time span, became disposition in new symbolic worlds, allowing them to establish new identities.

The analysis is inspired by the theoretical framework of the cultural-historical school of psychology, which perceives identity and agency as specific to practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed "worlds". This focus is combined with a social practice theoretical approach, highlighting identity as formed in - and at the same time forming practice, focusing on the practice and the multiple actions, activities and dialogues which make people invest themselves in different worlds and thus develop alternative identities. The articles thus unfold the significance of - and ways in which - actors engage in social practice, linked to a symbolic realm, and account for how their engagement makes them transform their identity and perspectives - irrespective of whether they engage in the extremist right wing, Fryshuset and/or EXIT.

The thesis consists of an introduction and a collection of six articles, followed by a summarising conclusion:

Tina Wilchen Christensen (2014) "To Study the Significance of Social Interaction for Former Right-wing Extremists Wanting to Disengage: Doing Participant Observation and Qualitative Interviews", *SAGE Research Methods Cases Chapter*, <http://srmo.sagepub.com/view/methods-case-studies-2014/n140.xml>

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EXIT Programmes' in *Journal for Deradicalisation Summer*/15, no. 3  
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Tina Wilchen Christensen (2015) 'The Continuous Struggle of Becoming...Somebody - Former Right-Wing Extremists' continued Process of Self-transformation and Social re-positioning after an Exit Programme' (not published)